



BIGGLES

AND THE PLOT THAT FAILED

Captain W.E. JOHNS

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CHAPTER 1

THE GREAT SAND SEA

The palms of the abandoned oasis of El Arig, the last outpost of the habitable world, hung motionless under a sky of burnished steel and heat that struck like a hammer.

On the rim of the depression from which the oasis sprang like a miracle Police-pilot 'Ginger' Hebblethwaite gazed through double-dark glasses, shaded by a green-lined sun hat, across a world of sand. The great desert, for as far as he could see, lay lifeless. An immense ocean of sand, utterly empty, utterly barren, utterly sterile; the parched skeleton of a land that had died under the merciless flogging of the everlasting sun. There was no shade; no rest for the eyes. No sound. No smell. No life. For nothing can live where no rain ever falls, no water ever flows.

There are deserts in which some forms of life have through the ages adapted themselves to endure eternal heat and drought. Here there was nothing. Only pitiless distances to horizons that reeled drunkenly in the thin, quivering air, the mocking sand, and silence. Absolute silence. The silence that is the silence of death. Everywhere a flat, tortured sameness. Or so it appeared.

Ginger, from past experience, knew better. He knew that this timeless, tideless ocean, was not flat. That the sand rolled in waves, like the waves of a storm-tossed sea suddenly frozen; great dunes, curving like horseshoes, which to the east and south marched in line abreast, if not to eternity as it appeared, then for a thousand miles or more. But with the sun directly overhead they cast no shadows and so could not be seen, either from ground level or from the air.

This was the region that even the Tuareg, those veiled nomads of the Sahara, called the Land of Devils; where, if you heard an echo, it was a devil calling. Ginger also knew that not all the fearful Libyan Desert was like this. He knew that out there beyond his view in the trackless waste a great rock formation broke through the sand, four hundred miles of gaunt black hills and silent canyons; mountains worn down by wind-blown sand to monstrous, misshapen stumps, like rotten teeth.

He also knew that there were vast depressions of cracked hard-baked mud, hundreds of feet below sea level, thought to be the beds of ancient lakes or inland seas. There were still some lakes, mostly salt; some, with vegetation, surprisingly beautiful. Or perhaps it was comparison with the surrounding desolation that made them appear beautiful. But in the great dunes there was nothing. Only sand.

What grim secrets did it hide? Ginger wondered.

He knew, as a matter of historical fact, that beneath this hideous sea lay the

mortal remains of at least one army; an army of fifty thousand men, their pack animals, their weapons, their baggage wagons. In the year 525 BC Cambyses, son of Cyrus the Great of Persia, was in Egypt, destroying the Egyptian gods and seeking plunder. From Khargar Oasis in Upper Egypt his army set off across the Great Sand Sea bound for another oasis, Siwa, intending to destroy and sack the fabulously wealthy Temple of Jupiter-Ammon. The distance was four hundred miles. It never arrived. This great host vanished, never to be seen again. What happened? No one knows. But reasonable conjecture is that it was overwhelmed by a storm and buried for all time under the unforgiving sand — the vengeance, the Egyptians claimed, of their outraged gods. The Tuaregs say there are three armies under the sand. Who the others were we do not know; but it could be true, for this land is very, very old, and native legends linger long.

It is now thought that there were civilizations here reckoned to date back to 300,000 years BC. Little is known of these people. Only ruins remain; runs of dwellings and temples with stones inscribed with an unknown writing; and graveyards of sun-bleached bones that lie as they may have lain for thousands of years.

North Africa was not always as it is today. The Romans called it Libya. It was from here that they obtained the wild beasts for the famous Roman circuses. To them, from the Atlantic to the Nile, was Libya; the southern part, Libya Interior. The modern name, Sahara, was introduced by the Arabs, the word *Sahh'ra* simply being Arabic for desert. What caused the tremendous change in this mysterious world is a matter for conjecture. There are several theories. One is that the Nile, or perhaps that other great river, the Niger, once flowed through the region, and at some unknown period of time changed its course, so leaving the land to dry up. The sand came on the prevailing wind from the deserts of Asia.

That could have happened. For as if heat alone were not enough to destroy life, here the sun has an ally. Wind. The wind that breeds the sand-storm. It can be born anywhere at any time. There is seldom any warning. A writhing yellow carpet rises from the desert floor. A gust of air as from the open door of a furnace picks it up and drives it forward until it seems the world has turned to sand, searing, blinding, suffocating. The dunes smoke. The sun, bloated and out of shape, disappears. A brown darkness falls. Earth becomes an inferno. Rocks are blasted to dust. Things that are not there appear, dissolve in sand and vanish. Nothing can survive.

After a storm, when the sand falls it can lay another trap. According to the way the grains lie the sand can pack down so hard as not to show a foot-mark. Elsewhere it can be as soft as snow, so that a man can sink up to his knees, and a wheeled vehicle to its axles. An aircraft cannot get off the ground in such conditions. Woe betide the pilot who finds himself bogged down, for under the desert sun the limit of time a man can live without water is twenty-four hours. Then the sun dries him up like an autumn leaf.

Even today the maps of this vast country are deceptive. Boundaries may be shown plainly enough, but they do not present a true picture. Egypt, for example, appears to be a country five hundred miles wide, and so it is as far as land surface is concerned. In actual fact, habitable Egypt is no more than the course of its great river, the Nile, seldom more than fifty miles wide. The rest is sand. Again, the boundary between Egypt and Libya is shown as a straight line running due south for seven hundred miles from the Mediterranean to the Sudan; but it would not be easy to find, for it passes across the Great Sand Sea where there are no marks, only the interminable yellow dunes. This may be the last part of the Earth's surface to be surveyed.

As we have said, the country could not always have been like this. Of what lost civilizations it hides little is known, but the names of prehistoric kings and queens linger on in the tales of the dying tribes that cling to the oases on the fringe. There are tales of treasure, too; and there may be some truth in these, for there has long been a trickle of gold and precious stones from the region. Where these come from nobody knows, for they are sold surreptitiously, and the Arab finders, taciturn and suspicious of strangers, will not talk. Until recent times it would have been death for a Christian to go near them.

Perhaps the most famous oasis in the Sahara is Siwa, a series of lakes one hundred and twenty-five miles long, with rocky outcrops, inhabited by people who may be the last survivors of the earlier civilizations. Two thousand years ago, and more, it was a magnet that drew to it the greatest men of the known world, kings and conquerors who came to learn their fate at the celebrated Temple of Jupiter-Ammon, founded in 1385 BC. There, an oracle of high priests professed to be able to foretell the future. The ruins can still be seen on the hill of Agourmi. Close by are more ruins, the remains of the huge citadel and palace of the old kings of Ammonia. A quarter of a mile away is the Fountain of the Sun, mentioned by Herodotus in the fifth century BC and other ancient writers.

This was the objective of the ill-fated army of Cambyses. Here, too, among others, came Alexander the Great, to learn from the high priests whether he was human or a god. He had reason to think he was divine, for he lost his way in the desert and ran out of water; and he would surely have perished had not a miracle occurred. It rained — where no rain had fallen for three hundred years. Rocks named after him tell us the course he took. From Marsa Matruh, on the Mediterranean coast (where Cleopatra, the famous Egyptian queen, had her magnificent summer palace) it is about one hundred and ninety miles, ten days' march, to Siwa.

After this long digression, intended to let the reader know something of the country in which Ginger now found himself, without breaking into the narrative later, let us return to him.

Feeling that his skin was cracking, for in such dry heat perspiration evaporates as it forms, he turned about and walked down into the *wadi* where,

under the palms that formed the oasis, protected by sheets of black polythene stood an aircraft, the Air Police 'Merlin'. The palms, with some acacia scrub, were there because the floor of the depression, being much lower than the surrounding sands, enabled their roots to get within reach of moisture drawn up by capillary attraction from the reservoir of subterranean water which everywhere has accumulated through the ages deep down in the earth.

This fact was known by men from the earliest times, for which reason they knew where to dig to reach the life-giving water. El Arig was no exception and could boast a shallow pool of blue water. Nearby, a light tent had been pitched, and within its meagre shade Biggles and Bertie sat in earnest conversation.

Seeing Ginger coming Biggles asked: 'What do you think of it?'

'I don't like it,' answered Ginger shortly, as he joined them. 'In fact, I hate the sight of it.'

'I don't like it, either. I didn't like it before we started,' returned Biggles.

'What are we going to do about it?'

Biggles shrugged. 'Carry on, I suppose. We shall have to put up some sort of a show. What else can we do? I don't feel like going home and admitting I was afraid of the sand.'

'Aren't you?' inquired Ginger.

'Of course I am.'

'That would be the sensible thing to do, old boy,' put in Bertie. 'Frankly, this bally place scares me rigid.'

'We've flown over deserts before,' reminded Biggles.

'But not this one, old boy — not this one,' said Bertie vehemently. 'Oh no. This is the desert of all deserts. In most, even in the Sahara, a few tough guys, like the Tuareg, who know the drill, manage to scrape along. But not here. They know this is the end and keep well clear of it. So would anyone with a grain of common sense.'

'Mander must have been out of his mind,' declared Ginger.

'A case of a lunatic jumping in where angels fear to tread,' resumed Biggles. He lit a cigarette and went on: 'It's a queer thing, but for some people a desert is an irresistible lure. Once they've seen one they can't keep away from it. If they go they come back. There's something about it that seems to fascinate them. Perhaps it's because a desert is one of the few places where there is still peace on earth. I wouldn't know. You might almost call it a disease. Desert fever. Anyone can catch it.'

'I shall do my best not to,' asserted Ginger.

Ignoring the interruption Biggles continued: 'The British seem particularly susceptible to the disorder — Charles Doughty, Richard Burton, Gertrude Bell, Lawrence of Arabia, to name only one or two. They were prepared to suffer the most appalling discomforts and take the most fearful risks.'

'And at the end most desert explorers have ended up in the sand,' put in Bertie. 'I know a bit about it. Major Laing was strangled by his Arab escort.'

Davidson, too, was murdered. Richardson died of thirst. Macguire was killed by Tuaregs.'

'You won't see any Tuaregs here. Besides, the people you're talking about travelled on foot.'

'I hope you're not trying to kid yourself that flying is any safer,' argued Ginger. 'I can think of several machines which, taking a short cut across the desert, were never seen again. General Laparrine was one. He tried air exploring and died in the sand. Dying of thirst isn't my idea of a comfortable way to end up.'

'Don't worry. I'm not taking any short cuts if I can prevent it.'

Bertie broke in. 'Not all the machines that ended up in the sands were taking short cuts. Nor were they exploring or out to break records. What about that American bomber that went west with a crew of seven?'

'That was a shocking business,' admitted Biggles. 'The result of a blunder.'

'What was that?' asked Ginger. 'I don't remember it.'

Biggles explained. 'During the war an American heavy bomber based on North Africa was briefed to crack a target in Italy. It wasn't seen again until long afterwards when the remains of it, and the crew, were spotted in the sand. That's how the story got into the news. It was then possible to work out what happened. The bomber did its job, a night operation, and headed for home. Moreover it reached the North African coast. Then, finding visibility poor the pilot asked the base wireless operator for his position.'

'Which is where the latest navigational aids came unstuck,' put in Bertie. 'The pilot must have been right over his own airfield at the time.'

'Exactly. But he didn't know that. The tragedy was, neither did the base operator. As far as he was concerned the aircraft was dead on the beam. This is what the pilot was told, so, naturally, he carried straight on, not realizing he had already overshot the airfield and was now heading out over the Great Sand Sea. By the time he spotted the mistake it was too late to do anything about it. He was nearly out of petrol. Remember, he had already been to Italy and back. A crash landing in the dunes now being inevitable he ordered his crew to bale out, which they did. He stuck to his ship and put it down in what turned out to be soft sand. The crew got together and did the only thing left for them. They marched north, hoping to get back to the coast, or somewhere near it. They never got out of the sand. They all died of thirst. The machine went on the "missing" list and for a long time what had happened to it remained a mystery. It was known to have reached the coast. Then what? I believe I'm right in saying it was a native rumour of a machine out in the sand that resulted in a search being made for it. So the lost machine was found.'

'How do we know what happened?' asked Ginger.

'The bodies were spotted, one by one, strung out over a distance as each man had struggled on till he dropped. One of the crew had kept a diary to the end.'

‘I wouldn’t call that the sort of story to tell here,’ muttered Ginger.

‘You asked for it.’

Bertie came in again. ‘Never mind lost machines, what about this emerald mine young Mander was looking for? Do you believe in it?’

‘Who knows what to believe in a place like this? The story could be true. Native rumours, maybe exaggerated, usually have a foundation of fact. Remember, storytelling here, as elsewhere where there is no written word, is a business, a profession. The story-teller carries with him the tools of his trade, in this case a little leather bag filled with pebbles. To us they would all look alike, but not so to the owner. He knows them all. Each one represents a certain story. He takes one out of the bag, haphazard, and tells the story it indicates. The trade — or art if you like — has been handed down from father to son for heaven only knows how long. One of these tales, often told, concerned a fabulous Tuareg queen who once dominated the entire land that is now the Sahara. Her name was Tin-Hinan. According to the tale, when she died she was buried in a great rock tomb with much ceremony — and, of course, with all her treasure of gold and jewels. Few people took this seriously. But one man did, a French explorer with desert experience who knew the Tuareg. Deciding there might be some truth in the story, in 1927 he made a search for the tomb — and found it. There lay what remained of the queen’s body.’

‘But no treasure though, I’d bet,’ put in Ginger.

‘You’d lose your money. The treasure exceeded anything the Count de Prorok — that was the explorer’s name — had imagined; gold and silver ornaments, necklaces and bracelets and strings of precious and semiprecious stones. Apart from their intrinsic value the find caused an archaeological sensation in that it revealed a new page in the history of the world. The treasure is, or was, in the museum in Algiers. As in most places nowadays anything found has to be handed over to the country concerned.’

‘If the Tuareg knew about this why didn’t *they* rifle the tomb?’ inquired Ginger, practically.

‘They have a saying, the dead are best left alone.’

‘Perhaps Mander is trying to find another tomb like it,’ suggested Bertie.

‘Could be; but if what his father told me is correct, being an ardent archaeologist he’d be less concerned with treasure as a clue that would enable the ancient language to be read. There are certainly plenty of old tombs in North Africa about which nothing is known.’¹

‘There is this about it,’ observed Ginger, perhaps trying to strike an optimistic note. ‘The only thing we have to contend with is all this confounded sand.’

‘Don’t you believe it,’ corrected Biggles grimly. ‘At this particular spot, perhaps. But according to Saharan explorers there are some oases, particularly where there are rocks, that fairly swarm with snakes, small but deadly; the cobras, or asps, one of which Cleopatra is said to have used to commit

suicide. There is also a horrible little beast, a lizard called the ouragen. It's only about eighteen inches long, but it has four sets of teeth, each fitted with first-class poison glands. If one of those devils gets his fangs into you, you've had it, chum. There's no known antidote.'

'Charming, I must say,' sneered Bertie. 'Why, I ask you, do we have to come to such a beastly place?'

Which brings us to the point where the reason for the airmen being where they were must be explained.

¹ This is true. The author has seen the huge stone cairn called by the Arabs 'The tomb of the Christian Maid'. But nobody could tell him who she was or anything about her. Another is said to be the tomb of Cleopatra Selene, daughter of the famous Cleopatra and Marc Antony, who married Juba, who ruled the region once called Mauritania.

CHAPTER 2

A FATHER SEEKS ADVICE

The assignment had begun three weeks earlier when Air Commodore Raymond, head of the Special Air Police, had called Biggles to his office. With the Air Commodore was a tall, well-built man of perhaps sixty years of age, clean shaven, hair going grey at the temples.

‘This is Brigadier Mander, an old friend of mine,’ introduced the Air Commodore. ‘He’s in trouble and thinks we may be able to help him.’

‘We’ll do our best,’ promised Biggles. ‘What’s the worry?’

‘The Brigadier has lost his son — his only son.’

‘I’m sorry—’

The Air Commodore broke in. ‘No, not that. I’m afraid I put it badly. Naturally, you assumed I meant his son was dead. He may be, but we have no proof of it. What I should have said was, the Brigadier’s son is missing, missing in our sense of the word. That is to say, two months ago he took off in an aircraft and has not returned.’

‘Has nothing been found — on the ground? Wreckage?’

‘Not a thing.’

‘Is it known where he was going?’

‘Yes. He didn’t make a secret of his proposed objective.’

‘Then provided he didn’t get off course it shouldn’t be very difficult to track him.’

The Air Commodore shook his head. ‘I’m afraid it isn’t as easy as that.’

‘Then what was his objective? One of the Poles?’

‘Worse.’

‘Worse! I can’t imagine anything worse.’

‘He set off, with a companion, to look for a tomb which, according to native gossip, is supposed to exist in the southern part of the Libyan Desert.’

Biggles grimaced. ‘You’re right, sir. I agree, that is worse. Much worse.’

The Brigadier spoke for the first time. ‘You talk as if you know what conditions there are like. Have you seen the desert?’

‘Yes, sir. Most RAF pilots who served in Egypt or North Africa must have seen it. Most of them I imagine would take care to keep away from it. That area of the earth has a sinister reputation.’

‘Why sinister?’

Biggles shrugged. ‘A pilot flying over it is trusting his life to a mechanical contrivance and even the best can go wrong. A pilot landing in the sand hasn’t much hope. Even on the fringe prospects are not too good. The natives, the Tuareg and the Sennusi, have been pretty well tamed by now, but I wouldn’t care to trust them very far. To put it bluntly, too many aircraft that have flown out over the southern part of the Libyan Desert haven’t been seen since. That

also goes, of course, for any other form of transport. It's a good place to keep away from.'

'But there have been reports of oases and ruins even in the heart of the desert.'

'I know, sir. But that has yet to be proved. Most of the people who set off to get proof haven't come back; or if they have they haven't lived long. That may be coincidence, but you won't get the natives to believe it. They say it's the work of the devils who live in the desert.'

'Poppcock. Superstition.'

'No doubt, sir. This talk, apart from native rumours, about oases in the desert, was started by a French civil pilot, in, I believe, 1925. He was blown off his course by a *haboob*, as sand-storms are called locally. He reported sighting an oasis not marked on the map. He was killed in an accident before he could give more detailed information. Sir Robert Clayton flew out to look for this oasis. He found what from photographs he took appeared to be a fertile *wadi*. He was making arrangements to go back when he died. It's very strange, but that has been the story all along the line. Whatever the answer may be, it isn't surprising the place has got an evil reputation. I have an open mind about it. What on earth induced your son to tackle such a dangerous proposition?'

'I'd better tell you the story from the beginning,' answered the Brigadier. 'It's rather a long one, but by sticking to the essential facts I'll make it as brief as possible.'

Biggles sat down, lit a cigarette and prepared to listen.

'My son, Adrian, is twenty-one,' began the Brigadier. 'That is important because he is no longer under my control. He is of age, and a legacy left by his mother, who died some years ago, makes him independent. In plain English he can do as he likes.'

'Which, from the way you said that, I take it he does,' put in Biggles dryly.

'Not always. Don't mistake me. He is a good boy. He respects my wishes; but when our ideas are in conflict he is in a position to go his own way.'

'I understand, sir.'

'Naturally, as we have always been a military family I had assumed he would be a soldier. And so I believe he would have been had not certain events deflected him from that course. It is often said that a man's life is what he makes of it, and up to a point that is true. But as often as not his actions are dictated by the people he meets; by incidents which, small in themselves, have consequences that could not have been foreseen. So with my son. He was always inclined to be influenced by others. It was meeting an RAF pilot, who had made a forced landing on my property in Surrey, that turned his ideas to aviation. This man stayed a few days at my house and the conversation was of nothing but flying.'

Biggles smiled. 'There's nothing unusual about that.'

'The upshot of it was, Adrian told me he had decided to make the RAF his

career, not the army. I raised no objection, but I said I thought he should finish his last year at Oxford, which in fact he did; but that did not prevent him from qualifying as a pilot at a flying school. He spent all his spare time in the air, and as soon as he came of age he bought a plane of his own.'

'May I ask the type of machine?'

'I never saw it except in the air over the house, but it was quite small with one engine. I seem to remember him calling it a Cub.'

'And was this the machine he flew to North Africa?'

'Yes.'

Biggles frowned.

'Why? Is there anything wrong with it?'

'Oh no. It's reliable enough. But a light plane of any sort isn't what I'd choose for exploring the Libyan Desert. I'm sorry I interrupted. Go on, sir.'

'This is where I come to the second part of the story,' continued the Brigadier. 'During my service in the Middle East I got to know, and became friendly with, Sir Cedric Goodall, the archaeologist. You may have heard of him. He came home for the hot season from where he was digging up some old ruins in Jordan and accepted my invitation to stay with me for a few days. It was at my house that Adrian met him. Goodall is enthusiastic about his work, so, as you might imagine, the conversation now was about the things he had dug up and what he still hoped to find. Adrian, always impressionable, listened to this, fascinated. The upshot of it was, when Sir Cedric returned to what he called his 'dig', Adrian had accepted an invitation to go out and see the site. You see what I meant a moment ago when I said a man's life can depend on the people he meets. Adrian flew to Jordan in his plane. He thought it was a good opportunity to try a long overseas flight. All went well. He stayed in Jordan for three weeks, long enough for him to become infected with this craze for digging up old pots and pans used by people thousands of years ago. When he flew home he brought with him a new friend he had met there; and so we come to the third man to have a marked influence on my son. By this time, you must understand, this archaeology bug had really got into Adrian's blood.'

'So this new friend was, I suppose, an archaeologist?'

'Yes. Or he claimed to be; and I must admit he could talk as if he knew all the answers. Adrian had met him in Jordan, but in exactly what circumstances I don't know. His name was Hassan Sekunder — the surname being, so I am told, Arabic for Alexander. I'd put his age at about thirty. He spoke English fluently and claimed to be an Egyptian. I hope I'm not doing the fellow an injustice when I say that in my opinion he could have been anything from a Turk to an Indian.'

'I gather you didn't like him,' said Biggles.

'There was really nothing you could put a finger on, but I wouldn't have trusted him a yard out of my sight. He was a bit too suave, too oily, if you know what I mean.'

Biggles nodded. 'I know the type. Are you sure this wasn't colour prejudice?'

'Oh no. Actually, there wasn't much colour about him. His skin was that pale olive brown one so often sees in the Middle East. I haven't spent all my life with men without learning to weigh them up.'

'Did you tell Adrian how you felt about this man?'

'Yes. But he wouldn't hear of it. He thought he was wonderful. He could do anything and everything. I seem to be a long time coming to the point of all this, but I haven't much farther to go. I wanted you to have a clear picture of the situation from the start. I must say that on his favourite subjects, archaeology and the history of the Middle East, he knew what he was talking about. He claimed that he had at one time worked for the Egyptian Archaeological Society. One of his jobs had been to go to an oasis called Siwa to report on some relics that had come to light. While there he had cured an old Arab of some disease, and for this was rewarded with the story which, eventually, was to take Adrian to the Sahara. I could see that coming a mile off, even before Sekunder put forward his proposition.'

'Which was that Adrian should fly them both somewhere to find something?'

'Exactly.'

'What was the proposition?'

'According to Sekunder the story the Arab told him was this. In the Sahara, somewhere south of a place called Siwa, there was an oasis that had not yet been put on the map. It was at the foot of some mountains that rose from a big depression that had once been a lake. In these mountains were the ruins of an ancient, unknown civilization. If such an oasis exists it was certainly not shown on any map that Adrian was able to procure. But there was more to it than this. This place was the tomb of a once great king of the Tuareg people named Ras Tenazza. Close by was the mine from which he obtained a fabulous collection of emeralds. These, by the way, were buried with him. The tomb was marked by a cairn of stones. It was at the foot of a tall, leaning, pinnacle of rock. It was put there so that when the rock fell it would hide the tomb for ever. At this place, too, there were many other tombs, some with inscriptions carved on the rocks. Adrian swallowed the story, hook, line and sinker, but I didn't believe a word of it.'

'Why not?'

'Would you?'

'I'd have an open mind about it. Queer things crop up in the Sahara from time to time. Was this place in Egypt or Libya?'

'Sekunder, not having seen it, and unable to find it on the map, didn't know. He said Siwa was just on the Egyptian side of the frontier, and the oasis was between two and three hundred miles south, or south-west, of it. I asked Sekunder, if he was so sure the story was true, and if he was convinced the oasis was there, why hadn't he been there and so got the credit for the

discovery? His answer was, such an expedition by camel caravan would be a costly business and he had never been able to afford it. I pointed out that, had he reported what he knew, either the Libyan or Egyptian government would have financed an expedition.'

'What did he say to that?'

'He said if he did that he'd get nothing out of it.'

'He wouldn't get anything out of it anyway — if he was honest — because by law he would have to hand over anything he found to the government of the country in which the discovery was made. That applies everywhere today.'

'I didn't know that. Nor, I am sure, did Adrian.'

'Sekunder, if he had worked for the Egyptian government, or as a genuine archaeologist, would know it. It sounds to me as if he intended to keep anything of value.'

'From the way he talked I'm sure of it. He offered a half share to Adrian, although I must say that my son, who was wildly excited about the whole thing, was more concerned with the adventure than making a profit out of the undertaking. Anyhow, to come to the point, Sekunder claimed it would be an easy matter to fly to the place. They would fly first to Marsa Matruh, on the coast, then on to Siwa where there was a landing ground.'

'That's true. Our fellows used it in the war.'

'He also said he would be able to pull the strings to get visas and permits to fly over the desert — which I must admit he did.'

'So they went.'

'Yes. I was all against what looked to me like a foolhardy and dangerous business, but I couldn't forbid it.'

'How long ago was this?'

'Two months.'

'And you have heard nothing since?'

'Yes. Adrian promised not to be away for more than a month and would keep in touch with me as far as this was possible. He wrote to me from Marsa Matruh saying they had arrived there without trouble. They were pushing on to Siwa the next day, and from there would take a course south, following a line of mapped oases for as far as they extended. Since then I have heard nothing. After a month of silence I began to get worried. When five weeks had passed I went to the Egyptian office in London and asked if they could help me. They were most co-operative and made urgent inquiries; but all they could tell me was, an aircraft had been seen at Siwa. It had stayed there for three days and then flown on without naming its destination. From the Egyptian office I learned something that increased my anxiety. Sekunder had said he had worked for the Egyptian Archaeological Society. It now transpired they had never heard of the man. That confirmed my suspicions that he was a liar, if nothing worse. What could I do? I thought of chartering a plane and flying out to Siwa myself. Then I remembered my friend the Air Commodore

and decided to ask for his advice. That's why I am here.'

The Air Commodore spoke, looking at Biggles. 'I've told him you know something about flying conditions over the Sahara. What do you think of Adrian's chances?'

Biggles looked dubious. 'Without knowing exactly where he was making for and what preparations he made that's a difficult question to answer. The Sahara covers a lot of ground. Even what they call the Great Sands, that is, the big dunes with no known oases, embrace thousands of square miles without a caravan track. From Siwa in the north to the Gilf Kebir Plateau in the south is something like a thousand miles. For five hundred miles east of the Khargah Oasis the map shows nothing except a water-hole on the fringe called El Arig. If Adrian is somewhere in that area where does one start looking? If he's on the ground, unable to get off, it might be a hundred years before the machine is spotted.'

'Adrian's objective must have been within reach of Siwa. That was to be the final stopping place before heading out into the blue,' stated the Brigadier.

'Siwa is a biggish place, as oases go,' explained Biggles. 'Actually, it's a long rather narrow string of oases, always getting smaller as they fade out in the desert. It would be the obvious jumping off place in the north.'

The Air Commodore came back. 'I've told the Brigadier that without authority there's nothing we can do about this. But still, as Adrian is a British subject, there's just a chance that the government would sanction a rescue party if he was prepared to finance it. This, of course, would mean getting permission from the Egyptian and Libyan governments to fly over their territory. It's unlikely they would raise any objection as long as they were not involved.' The Air Commodore looked at Biggles. 'If I put the proposition to the Higher Authority that we send out a search party would you take charge of it?'

'Of course.'

'Very well. We'll leave it like that for the time being. No doubt if the Brigadier gets any news he'll let us know.'

Biggles returned to his own office and told the others what was in the wind.

It was a week before he heard any more. Then his Chief sent for him again to tell him that, as the Brigadier had still heard nothing of his son, permission had been given for the Air Police to make a search using their own equipment provided Brigadier Mander was prepared to defray expenses.

That nearly brings us to where we came in. It took another week to make the necessary arrangements and get the permits to fly over the North African territories. Biggles had chosen to use the Merlin brought on the strength of the Air Police for the operation narrated in *Biggles' Special Case*.

The Merlin had landed at Siwa. Learning nothing there that was not already known, the party had gone on to El Arig, the oasis nearest to the region to be searched. Before them now lay the Great Sand Sea.

'Now we've had a rest, tomorrow we'll start on the real job,' said Biggles

seriously. 'The only way to tackle it, as far as I can see, is to take the desert section by section, wedge by wedge using this as a base and sticking rigidly to the golden rule of flying over unknown country: which is never to go beyond the point of no return.² Two or three days should be time enough to cover the area of desert for which, to the best of our knowledge, young Mander was making. The trouble may be, in the absence of landmarks, to keep a check on what ground we have covered and what we have not. It would be easy to miss out a slice.'

'What do you think are the chances of Mander being alive?' asked Ginger.

'Pretty small.'

Then what are we going to look for?

'Frankly — we might as well face it — what I expect to find, if we find anything at all — is an aircraft with two dead men lying under it. It might be intact or it might have crashed. It wouldn't make much difference. With what water it could carry, only by a miracle could Mander and his friend have survived for two months. Of course, miracles do happen, but not so often that you notice them. There's one angle about this show, outside the obvious physical dangers, that disturbs me.'

'What's that, old boy?' queried Bertie, seriously.

'The Brigadier, who from his experience must be a pretty good judge of men, didn't like this fellow Sekunder. He got the impression he was not to be trusted. He didn't say so in so many words, but it was clear he thought he had a false card up his sleeve to play when it suited him. In short, Sekunder was not what he pretended to be; and that to some extent was proved when the Egyptian Archaeological Society denied all knowledge of him.'

'As Sekunder wasn't a pilot it's hard to see how he could do anything underhand. I mean to say, he'd have to rely on Mander to fly him home.'

'We have only Sekunder's word for it that he knew nothing about flying.'

'You think he might be able to handle a plane?'

'It's unlikely, but possible.'

'But look here; had he been able to fly he wouldn't have needed Mander. He could have worked on his own — if you get my meaning.'

'Maybe it was the plane he wanted. Planes are expensive and he may not have had the money to buy one.'

'Why did he pick on Mander?'

'Since you ask me I'd say because he was young, inexperienced, and above all, enthusiastic. He would probably have gone anywhere with anybody if the object interested him.'

'You think Sekunder told a cock-and-bull story?'

'No, I'm not saying that. On the contrary, I'm pretty sure Sekunder believed the story he told, or something like it, or he wouldn't have risked his life flying over such dangerous country as this. If he is playing a game of his own the trouble would blow up if something of value was found. The arrangement was, remember, equal shares. Sekunder might try to grab the lot.'

But all this is guesswork. Let's wait until we get some evidence before we condemn the fellow as a trickster. The next day or two should provide the answer — if there is one.'

'There is this about it, old boy; they haven't been here or we'd have seen signs — litter lying about, and that sort of thing,' remarked Bertie.

'Matter of fact, I was rather hoping to find they'd been here because that would suggest this is the nearest water to wherever they were making for.'

'Would they know about it?'

'I'd think so. The oasis is big enough to be shown on the map. I reckon it's a good half a mile long and half as wide, so they could hardly miss it. From what I've seen of it it's some time since anyone was here. You'll usually find camel dung round any desert water-hole, but what little there is here looks old stuff.'

'Isn't that a bit surprising — if you see what I mean?'

'I don't think so. After all, the place isn't on any regular caravan trail; and there's nothing beyond it for a long way except sand. Why should anyone come here?'

'Then you don't think we need mount a guard tonight?' put in Ginger.

'I don't think that's necessary. It's obvious the place is little used. If some Arabs did turn up there's no reason why they should do us any mischief. If you take my advice you'll turn in while the sand is warm. It'll be perishing towards dawn. It's not so much the heat of the day that knocks you flat as the drop in temperature after midnight. It can fall as much as ninety degrees.

Ginger, it wouldn't be a bad idea if you brewed a dish of tea to replace some of the weight we've lost in perspiration. I reckon I'm down ten pounds already. Tomorrow, at sun-up, we'll start work, leaving everything here as it is. It's unlikely there will be visitors to interfere with it.'

1 The Merlin. A twin piston-engined eight-seater originally designed for 'feeder' air lines in conjunction with the main air routes. Equipped with every modern device for comfort and efficiency (including a kitchenette and small refrigerator), it has speed combined with a considerable endurance range. It can climb with full load, on one engine if necessary.

2 Point of no return. A distance from which an aircraft would not be able to get back to its base. If it did, its only course would be to continue on regardless of what lay ahead.

CHAPTER 3

AN UNEASY RECONNAISSANCE

The stars were still in the sky although losing some of their brilliance when, the next morning, the airmen were on the move, Ginger preparing coffee and the others removing the protective coverings from the aircraft.

‘This is the only time of day white men can work in a climate of this nature,’ Biggles had said. ‘I want to get back here before the sun is high enough to blister our hides. By noon it’ll be hotter than hell in the open desert.’

‘What exactly is the drill?’ asked Ginger, as they crouched round a small fire with coffee and biscuits, for the thin dawn wind that ruffled the palm fronds was bitterly cold.

‘For a first trip I shall fly a straight course out and back, on a compass course that will take in the most easterly area of the desert to be explored. I shall watch ahead. You two will watch each side. Bertie, you take the port side; Ginger the starboard. In that way we shall look over a lot of ground. If there’s anything to be seen we should see it.’

‘And just what are we looking for, old boy?’ questioned Bertie.

‘Anything that isn’t sand. The chances are that’s all we shall see — sand. Obviously, what we’re really looking for is an aircraft, a Piper Cub, down on the carpet, either in one piece or several. Failing that we might spot wheel marks to show where it landed at some time. One thing we can be sure of is: after the time it’s been away it’ll no longer be in the air.’

‘And that’s all?’

‘Not by a long chalk. According to this chap Sekunder, somewhere out in the blue in front of us there should be a range of hills, mountains or merely rock outcrops. I don’t know. If that’s true, and I see no reason to doubt it as no man in his right mind would start off for a non-existent objective, we should have no great difficulty in finding the hills, anyway. Again, according to Sekunder there should be a conspicuous pinnacle which was to be the final objective. We’ll look for it, because provided the machine behaved properly that’s where we’re most likely to find it. If we locate these alleged hills that’s as far as I shall go. How many trips we shall be able to make will depend, of course, on how far it is to the mountains. All the spare petrol we have is a dozen jerricans. I’d rather not touch that, holding it in reserve for an emergency. We needn’t hump all that extra weight about with us. We’ll leave half of it here, in the tent. No one is likely to touch it. We shall know better how we stand, I hope, after we’ve made our first trip out.’

‘If the mountains are more than two hundred miles from here we shan’t make many trips,’ said Ginger, dryly.

‘You’ve put your finger on our weakest point,’ answered Biggles. ‘Until

we know how far it is to the mountains, and established that they are really there, we're flying blind — so to speak.'

'And if we spot the machine in the sand are you going to land?' queried Ginger.

'At this juncture I'd say not. If the sand was soft we'd simply put ourselves in the same position as the Cub. That would be a daft thing to do. It isn't as if the crew could still be alive. We'll leave that until we've seen the machine and had a look at the sort of ground it's standing on. There may be hard patches, but I'm not taking any risks.'

'I'm with you there — absolutely,' agreed Bertie.

Biggles got up. 'All right. Let's get on with it before the sun starts belting us.'

'Don't you think it would be a good thing if one of us stayed here to watch our kit?' asked Ginger.

'No.'

'Why not?'

'Because if by some wild chance we found the oasis, with Mander and Sekunder on it still alive, I shouldn't come back here. There'd be no point in it. I'd pick them up and head north for Siwa. Whoever was left here would be stuck for a long time. It's better the party should stay together.'

'I see what you mean,' replied Ginger.

'Fine. That's enough talking. Let's get away.'

In a few minutes, as the glow of the false dawn spread upwards from below the horizon, the Merlin was racing across the hard sand that had packed down in the dry, treeless end of the *wadi*. It was on this it had landed, having ascertained from inquiries at Siwa that it was safe.

The air was still cold, and without a breath of wind was as stable as air can be; but they were all aware that this ideal state of affairs would not last long. Once the sun got into its stride the atmosphere would be as choppy as a stormy sea. The great dunes, some of them hundreds of feet high, would see to that. There would be no escaping from the 'bumps', for over hot desert country they can be felt at a considerable altitude.

However, for the moment flying conditions were near perfect, and having taken the Merlin up to five thousand feet, from which height in the crystal clear atmosphere it was possible to command a view of perhaps fifty miles in every direction, Biggles settled down to his predetermined compass course. Without a landmark of any sort in sight, there was no other way of keeping track of the aircraft's position.

Ahead, now, lay the Great Sand Sea, a spectacle no man can contemplate, no matter how he may be travelling, without fear in his heart. Gazing across such a landscape he realizes, perhaps for the first time, how puny he is, and how insignificant the ordinary things of life. Ginger, looking through the window on his side, was very conscious of it; but he did not mention it. Such thoughts are better not expressed while in the danger area.

He was not without experience of desert flying, but this awful expanse of the earth's surface, this world of silence and the ever-present threat of death by thirst, put 'butterflies' in his stomach. He knew that already they were all trusting their lives to a mechanical device commonly called the internal combustion engine; and engines, by their very nature, can never be perfect. Therefore, every change, real or imaginary (it can be either) in the note of the two power units caused his nerves to vibrate like banjo strings.

Biggles flew on at a steady cruising speed, his eyes restless, generally scanning the scene ahead, but constantly switching to the instrument panel to check that all was well.

Broad daylight came swiftly, to paint the mighty dome of heaven a blue of unimaginable intensity; not that this would last long; it would gleam like burnished metal as the sun thundered on to its zenith. Although he was wearing the darkest glasses procurable, Ginger knew better than to look directly at it. One glance can cause temporary blindness, and even permanent injury to the eyes.

The Merlin began to rock, sometimes with a short jerky movement, sometimes as if wallowing on a stormy sea.

For half an hour, during which time the oasis that was their base had faded from sight behind, nobody spoke. Then Biggles said quietly: 'I can see something ahead. From the way it lies along the horizon it could be a range of hills.'

The others peered into the glare.

'How far away?' asked Ginger.

'It isn't easy to judge distance in this light, but for a rough guess I'd say the best part of fifty miles.'

'Reckoning we must have covered more than a hundred, whatever it is in front of us can't be more than a hundred and fifty miles from where we started.'

'About that. Not too bad.'

Bertie spoke. 'That isn't sand we're looking at; not even tall dunes. The line is too rough, if you see what I mean. It can only be rocks. Pretty hefty rocks, too. Stretches for miles.'

Biggles agreed. 'We shall soon know. Watch for a fringe of palms against the sky. Palms would mean an oasis, or water not very far down. If it is an oasis it isn't shown on any of our maps — not that there's anything remarkable in that. Half the Sahara has yet to be properly surveyed.'

'The question is,' went on Ginger thoughtfully, 'is this the place Mander and his pal were making for?'

'Could be. We've no means of knowing. If it is it begins to look as if they got there. We've seen no sign of the machine. Even if they got to their objective it doesn't follow they're still alive. That would depend on whether or not they found water. That stuff, so common at home, takes top priority here. In fact, it's the only thing that matters.'

‘I believe I can see palms,’ said Bertie.

‘Palms would no doubt mean dates. They could keep going on dates for a while, but they’d still need a supply of that stuff which at home we pour down the sink.’

The Merlin bored on through the now turbulent air, Biggles having to work hard with the control column to keep it on even keel. All eyes were on the horizon which had hardened to a jagged line, like a row of broken teeth. There was no longer any doubt. Before them was a range, or, as the line was not continuous, a series of groups, of gaunt black hills.

‘Keep your eyes open for an aircraft on the ground,’ said Biggles, beginning to lose height and taking up a slightly different course. ‘I’m aiming to strike the hills at the eastern end and work along them from there. I doubt if we shall be able to cover the lot today. We’ll see how we go.’

The picture in front was now fairly clear, and it was not a pretty one. Indeed, it was a scene of such utter and complete desolation, a chaos of sand and rock, not easy to describe. It might have been an imaginative artist’s impression of a newly-born unoccupied planet.

The great dunes fell away in diminishing waves to end at a shallow depression so vast that the extremities could not be traced. The sand, or much of it, appeared to have been blown, or washed, away to leave a comparatively smooth floor that could have been the bed of an inland sea or a once great river. From the centre, like the carapace of a giant crocodile, sprang a broad line of hills, of red and black rocks of all sizes and fantastic shapes. They gave an impression that they were the summits of mountains worn down by the erosion of wind and sand. Much of the ground in the broader parts of the depression presented a curious mottled surface, the result, it was presently observed as the aircraft flew lower, of countless small cracks.

Bertie had been right about the palms; but they were miserable specimens, dead or dying, the trunks grey, fronds brown and in tatters. There was no indication of water. The blast of heat flung up by the blistering rocks tossed the aircraft about like a scrap of paper.

‘We shan’t find anyone here,’ declared Ginger. ‘What a horror.’

‘There must have been water here at some time, and not so long ago; the palms are proof of that,’ answered Biggles, turning the machine to follow the depression.

‘Can’t we go a bit lower?’

‘No, thank you. This is low enough for me,’ returned Biggles grimly. ‘My arm’s stiff as it is, trying to keep us right side up.’ His voice rose to a cry of surprise. ‘Look at that!’ He tilted the aircraft so that they could all get a better view of what had caught his eye.

From between some rocks, apparently alarmed by the machine or its shadow, had broken six white, or pale-coloured, horned animals. They raced away in fantastic leaps.

‘Gazelle,’ said Bertie.

‘Oryx,’ said Biggles. ‘That can only mean there’s water at no great distance. Those pretty little beasts can equal the camel when it comes to endurance without water; all the same, they have to eat and drink some time.’

The oryx bounded into a canyon and disappeared.

‘If, as you say, there must be water in these hills, how about landing and looking for it?’ suggested Ginger.

‘Not on your life. It might be fifty miles away.’

‘I can see places where we could get down. That dry mud, or whatever it is, looks firm enough.’

‘We’ll consider that when we have a reason to land — and it’ll have to be a good one,’ answered Biggles grimly. ‘What we’re looking for is a plane, or the remains of one. Another thing we might watch for is a tall pinnacle of rock that looks as if it might topple over. According to Sekunder, at the base there’s a tomb which should be stuffed with gold and precious stones. That, of course, is what brought him here. Gosh! This is hard work.’

‘How much longer are you going to stick it?’ asked Bertie.

‘I’ve had about enough for one day,’ asserted Biggles. ‘Mark that red cliff, on the left, just in front of us. We’ll come back tomorrow and start again there, working along the hills for as far as they go. If Mander got here, as he hasn’t gone home his machine is bound to be here somewhere. We’ve still a lot of ground to cover.’

‘What are those heaps of white things I can see?’ asked Bertie in a puzzled voice.

‘They look to me like bones, probably camel bones. Of course, we don’t know how long they’ve been lying there, but if I’m right it would pretty well prove there must have been water here at one time.’

‘If camels came here, men must have been here, too.’

‘How do you work that out?’

‘Well, old boy, that’s pretty obvious. There are no wild camels, and tame camels would hardly come here by themselves. I mean to say — would they?’

‘They might.’

‘Why should they?’

Biggles smiled faintly. ‘That’s a question only a camel could answer. He does nothing without a reason. If you asked me to guess I’d say camels came here for the only thing that really matters in this part of the world — water.’

‘The camel has always struck me as a pretty dumb brute.’

‘In that case you’re right off the beam. Don’t get wrong ideas about the camel. I know he stinks and may have a foul temper; but who wouldn’t, the life he has to lead? Having said that, he’s just about the most perfect example of adaptation to environment you could find. He’s got a lot more sense than a horse. He can do anything a horse can do and a lot of things a horse can’t do.’

‘Such as?’

‘He can carry a load that would break a horse’s heart. He spends most of his life doing nothing else. Turn him loose and he’ll make straight for the

nearest water — which is something you couldn't do. When he refills his water tank he takes in a couple of gallons without pausing to get his breath. You couldn't do that, either.'

'He can't beat a horse for speed,' argued Ginger.

'For a mile or two; but on a day's journey I'd back the camel to get there first. When the horse has had enough the camel will still be striding along at the same pace without a falter. As I said a moment ago, if what we see down below are the skeletons of camels there must once have been water, no matter whether the beasts were brought here by men or made their own way here. But we're not looking for camels, not dead ones, anyway. I can't take any more of this. I'm going home.'

So saying, Biggles turned away from the rock formation and took up a course for the oasis that was their base.

They had covered about half the distance when Bertie let out a cry that might have expressed alarm or astonishment. He pointed to the north. 'Oh I say! Take a look at that! It isn't true.'

Far away, looming gigantic, striding across the sky — as it appeared — was a line of six camels. With the almost majestic dignity of their kind they marched in single file. As far as it was possible to judge each one appeared to carry a rider.

'You're right,' said Biggles. 'It isn't true; or only partly true. We can't actually see that caravan. It's probably beyond the horizon. What we're looking at is a mirage. They're common enough in this sort of country.'

'Who on earth can they be?'

'I can't imagine anyone except the Forgotten of God.'

'The *what*?'

'That's what the Arabs call the Tuareg. Or maybe that's what they call themselves. I don't know. I only know that as a tribe there are not a great many left. They're tough. The French had a lot of trouble with them when they first took over the Sahara.'

'Unless the picture we see is cockeyed, those camels are making for the hills we've just left,' observed Ginger.

'Yes,' returned Biggles thoughtfully. 'That does surprise me. I wouldn't have expected to find Tuareg here. What the deuce can be their object, I wonder? I'll grab a little altitude. We may be able to see the real live animals.' He gave the engines a trifle more throttle and eased back the control column.

This move defeated its object, for as the Merlin began to climb the picture began to fade, to dissolve, so to speak, in thin air. In a few seconds it had disappeared entirely, leaving only the everlasting sand.

'Queer business,' murmured Biggles, dropping back to cruising speed.

'How about turning north for a bit to find the caravan?' suggested Ginger.

'No. It's no concern of ours. We'd do better to mind our own business.'

The aircraft continued on its way.

CHAPTER 4

AN UNPLEASANT SURPRISE

The Merlin landed at its temporary base without mishap and taxied on to get as near to the tent as the palms would allow, a matter of fifty yards or so.

‘We’ll have a drink and get the covers on her,’ said Biggles as they got out and started walking. Suddenly he increased his pace, and then stopped, pointing at the ground. ‘Someone has been here,’ he said crisply. ‘These are camel marks.’

‘Well they aren’t here now or we’d see them,’ observed Ginger.

‘I wonder — did they touch our stuff?’ queried Bertie, a note of anxiety in his voice.

‘I wouldn’t think so; anyway, not unless they were desperately short of something,’ replied Biggles.

A few more paces and they stopped, staring. Where the tent had been was a black patch. Ashes. They hurried on. A glance confirmed their worst fears. All their property had been burnt; even the aircraft covers. For a minute no one spoke. Then Biggles said, helplessly: ‘I can’t believe it.’

Investigation revealed that everything had been lost except some foodstuffs that had been buried in the sandy floor to protect them from the heat. These evidently had not been discovered.

‘What about our spare petrol?’ said Ginger.

They strode swiftly to where, in a small depression at the foot of a palm, under a pile of dead palm fronds, six of the reserve cans had been placed.

‘This stuff has been moved,’ stated Biggles, grimly, as they approached.

Ginger was leaning forward to start uncovering the cans, when with a cry of ‘Watch out!’ Biggles thrust him aside.

Ginger looked startled.

Biggles pointed. No words were necessary.

Slowly, so slowly that movement was hardly perceptible, from the base of the heap a snake was emerging. It was small, not more than two feet long. Its head was squat and flat. From just above the cold glittering eyes rose a protuberance like a horn.

Ginger’s face lost some of its colour, ‘Good gracious!’ he gasped.

Biggles picked up a loose frond, stripped the dead leaves, and with the stem, in a single blow, broke the creature’s back. He then beat it to death and tossed the body clear. ‘I don’t any more kill things for fun, but that’s the only thing to do with those little devils,’ he said in a hard voice. ‘Had he got his fangs into you, Ginger, in about ten minutes this party would have been one man short.’

‘A viper?’

‘Horned viper. According to historians this was the asp that ended the life

of the famous Cleopatra.'

Said Bertie, gravely: 'It looks as if we shall have to be careful what we touch and where we put our feet. What was the little beast doing here?'

Biggles shrugged. 'They're common all over North Africa. You never know where one is going to pop up. Some oases, particularly where there are old burying grounds, are lousy with them. Near Biskra there's a hill honeycombed with snake holes. The local Arabs call it The Cursed Site. They say that in the evening the snakes come out in thousands. No one can get near the place. The devil of it is the snakes attack without provocation.'

'We shall, I trust, have no reason to go near it,' said Bertie, polishing his monocle thoughtfully.

'This one must have come here after we dumped the petrol,' remarked Ginger.

'Apparently. We made a nice shady spot for it. But never mind snakes. What about our petrol?' With extreme caution Biggles began removing the fronds one by one. As soon as the top can was exposed he lifted it by the handle. The weight told him all he needed to know. 'Empty!' he exclaimed laconically. 'Good thing we didn't leave all our reserve fuel.'

'Now who would do a thing like this?' asked Bertie, sadly.

'It must have been that caravan we saw — the mirage,' declared Ginger. 'It must have called here.'

'That's probably the answer,' agreed Biggles, lifting out the remaining cans. All were empty.

'Tell me this, old boy,' requested Bertie. 'Why, having scuppered our petrol, did they bother to put the cans back?'

'They hoped, maybe, we wouldn't discover the petrol had gone till we needed it.'

'Or was it,' put in Ginger, 'to encourage the snake, which they may have put in, to stay there, hoping it would bite one of us?'

'That's a possibility that hadn't occurred to me,' admitted Biggles.

'Oh, come off it,' objected Bertie. 'How could they handle the snake?'

'Some Arabs, like some Indians, can do queer things with snakes,' reminded Biggles. 'If there is one anywhere near they can call it up. Don't ask me how, but it's a fact. I've seen it done. But never mind snake-charmers. This has given me food for thought.'

'It must have been a party of Tuaregs,' asserted Ginger.

'That's what one would naturally think,' conceded Biggles. 'It may be so, yet I rather doubt it.'

'Why doubt it?'

'To start with, what possible reason could they have for sabotaging our petrol? It was no use to them. From what I know about desert travel, Arabs in general have a code of unwritten laws about each other's property. It must be so or they'd slowly exterminate each other. Arabs are Moslems, and to some, I know, it's a matter of religion. Mahomet, in his wisdom, laid down some

rules of behaviour. Even in tribal warfare, for instance, it was forbidden to cut down even the enemy's fruit trees or date palms. It doesn't take long to cut down a tree, but you can't replace it as quickly. But let's get out of this heat.'

'Then what do you make of it?' asked Ginger, when they were in the shade of the palms.

'If Arabs, Tuareg, Senussi, or what have you, did this, then I'd say they were forced or persuaded by the man in charge of the caravan.'

'But who could he be? What sort of man?'

'I have a feeling it was someone who knew we were coming here; knew, or had an idea, of what we were doing. He didn't want us here, and seeing a chance to make things difficult for us, took advantage of it. That's all I can think of.'

Bertie chipped in. 'But look here, old boy. That implies some rascal knew about Mander's air trip and its purpose.'

'You can put it like that.'

'In which case we haven't much chance of finding Mander alive.'

'That doesn't follow. There's another side to the picture. If Mander was known to be dead, why interfere with us? Mander may be dead, and probably is, but as I see it the man responsible for this didn't know whether he was dead or alive. And that goes for Sekunder. Someone was wise to what they were after. Of course, the raiders may not have known we were here, or who we were, but they'd see our landing tracks and guess.'

Ginger spoke. 'I suppose this couldn't have been the work of that fellow Sekunder? Mander's father took a poor view of him — said he wouldn't trust him a yard.'

'Even so, it's hard to see why Sekunder should injure us.'

'Suppose he and Mander found a treasure. He might plan to grab the lot.'

Biggles considered the suggestion. 'I can't see how that could happen. Sekunder went with Mander in the aircraft. How could he get here, or back to Siwa, without him?'

Bertie cut in again. 'Talking about it isn't going to help us. The kernel of the bally nut, if I may say so, seems to me to be this. What effect has this dirty business had on our arrangements?'

Biggles answered. 'Very little, beyond the obvious fact that we now know we have unexpected enemies to contend with. We can still make two more trips to the mountains, and that should about cover the lot. If Mander reached them we should see his machine. If he didn't it would be a waste of time looking for him. I don't propose to search the entire Sahara. We shall just have to be more careful from now on, that's all.'

'Careful?'

'I'm thinking particularly of fuel and food. As far as food is concerned we should be able to manage on what we have. At a pinch we can help out with dates for the short time we're likely to be here. Thank goodness the people who came here didn't interfere with the water. That would have put the lid on

us.'

'They may have left it alone knowing they were coming back this way, and would need it,' said Ginger.

'There may be something in that,' agreed Biggles.

'I'll tell you something else,' went on Ginger. 'The thought has just occurred to me. If these raiders left here for the mountains, why didn't we see them, instead of only their shadows?'

'That's easy to answer, although we've no proof they were heading for the mountains. For the sake of argument let's assume they were. The range, as we saw, is a long one, running for miles. They may have headed for the far end, in which case they'd be on a different course from us. I mean, we wouldn't actually fly over them. We may see them tomorrow. I'm not doing any more flying today, in this infernal heat.'

'Then you intend to carry on?'

'Of course. As if nothing had happened. Tomorrow we'll do what we did this morning, taking in a different section of hills. If that's where the raiders are bound for we shall beat them to it. We reckoned the hills were a good hundred and fifty miles from here. The thieves could only have arrived here after we left, so when we saw the mirage they couldn't have been far on their way. As camels go, I can't see them getting to the hills inside four or five days. As far as we know they have no reason to hurry. With no intermediate oasis those camels will be heavily loaded. They'll have to carry all the water they need with them. Come to think of it, they must be reckoning on finding water in the hills. They couldn't carry enough to get them there and back here.'

'A camel can go for days without water.'

'That may be, but he goes better with a belly full. He doesn't like going without a drink any more than we do.'

'Tell me this,' went on Ginger. 'As there's no trail across the big sands, how do they find their way?'

Biggles nodded. 'You make a point there, one that might answer some of our questions. Desert Arabs know the stars for night travel. The caravan we saw was on the move in daylight. Like us, it could have been on a compass course. To the best of my knowledge Arabs don't carry compasses. So what? It suggests there's someone in the party, possibly a white man, who has a compass and knows how to use it. And while we're on that angle I'll tell you something else. According to my information, Arabs, even Tuareg, keep clear of the big sands. They're the home of devils.'

'What are you getting at?' asked Bertie.

'To travel across the open desert to those hills would be a risky undertaking at the best of times. A sand-storm would wipe out a caravan in no time, and the men with those camels must know that as well as we do — probably better. Therefore it seems to me that the people who came here and pinched our stuff, and are presumably now out in the desert on their way to

the hills, must have a thundering good reason for risking their lives; because that's what they're doing, and they must know it. For what are men prepared to risk their lives?'

'Money, old boy. Money.' Bertie supplied the answer.

'Jolly good. You may have hit the nail right on the head. I would wager that at the end of this trail there's money, and lots of it.'

Ginger's eyebrows went up. 'You don't mean real money, actual cash?'

'Of course not. Things worth money.'

'Treasure?'

Biggles smiled cynically as he lit a cigarette. 'Perhaps. It depends on what you call treasure. You know how I feel about treasure hunting. There could be some interesting relics in the mountains, but I wouldn't expect to find a treasure to be compared with, say, the Inca gold of South America. I see two possibilities of a valuable find. They may be linked together. First, there's this alleged tomb, near a pinnacle of rock, of some ancient king of the region; a chap named Ras Tenazza. In accordance with ancient custom his personal property was buried with him. This was Sekunder's story and there could be some truth in it. Legend has often been found to have a basis of fact. Obviously Sekunder believed the story, or he wouldn't have been such a fool as to come here.'

'All right,' put in Ginger. 'Let's suppose a king named Ras Tenazza was buried in the mountains and his people put his bits and pieces with the body. What do you suppose they would consist of?'

'We can only judge by what has been found in other old tombs in North Africa. There would, I imagine, be a certain amount of gold and silver, in the shape of jewellery and ornaments, and some precious and semiprecious stones. That may sound fine and romantic, but let's not forget that we didn't come here on a treasure hunt. We came here to look for young Mander — at his father's expense. He'd take a poor view of it if we wasted our time looking for a collection of antiques.'

'You said yourself there had always been a trickle of emeralds from the interior and no one knew where they came from,' reminded Ginger.

'So I've been told, and that, I must admit, supports the story of an emerald mine near the tomb of King what's-his-name, although, of course, the emeralds may have come from other old tombs. Sekunder may have had a second string to his bow. Failing to find the tomb, he may have hoped to find an emerald mine. Obviously he didn't come here just for the hell of it. He had ideas of getting rich quick.'

'And if he found an emerald mine he'd get what he wanted, if you see what I mean,' interposed Bertie.

'Perhaps. On the other hand he might find he'd been sold a pup.'

'How do you make that out?'

'There are emeralds and emeralds. Some are worth practically nothing. To be of any great value a stone must be perfect, and a large perfect emerald is

something that doesn't often happen. As it comes out of the ground an emerald is a green crystal. It can be transparent, or translucent, and it hardens on exposure to the air. Emeralds have been found weighing over a hundred pounds, yet they were worth practically nothing.'

'Why not? I don't get it.'

'Because they were so full of flaws, and so brittle, that they went to pieces at a touch. A large emerald without a flaw, which ruins its natural beauty, is rare. Find one the size of a robin's egg and you could ask any price you liked for it. It's the same with rubies. These huge rubies that the Indian princes used to wear are not worth as much as most people imagine. They went in for size; but with all gems it isn't so much the size that counts as quality. If you try to cut down a big stone to get a perfect piece out of it, it's liable to fly to dust and you find you're left with nothing.'

'How does that happen?'

'Because the flaws are minute pin-holes of compressed air, ready to explode if they're touched.' Biggles frowned. 'But what's all this talk about precious stones? We've more important things to deal with.'

Ginger grinned. 'You started it. You thought Sekunder might be looking for an old emerald mine.'

'Quite right. So I did.'

'That would go for Mander, too, I suppose.'

'Maybe. Maybe not. From what his father told me Adrian was more interested in genuine archaeology. Having money of his own, I imagine he'd get a bigger thrill from discovering something that might throw a light on the original inhabitants of what is now the Sahara, before it completely dried up. But that's enough. I've talked myself dry. Ginger, you might slip over to the machine and fetch some soda water from the fridge. Tomorrow we'll have another bash at the mountains.'

CHAPTER 5

STRANGE DEVELOPMENTS

Dawn saw the Merlin again in the air, heading for the hills, this time on a slightly different course, one calculated to strike the objective nearer to the middle; that is to say, beyond the point where the reconnaissance of the previous day had been concluded.

It was thought they might see the caravan that had produced the mirage, and they did. Within a quarter of an hour it could be seen in front of them, six camels in line winding through the great dunes. The caravan did not stop, although the raiders must have heard the plane long before it was over their heads.

‘They must have seen us,’ remarked Ginger, looking down from five thousand feet.

‘Of course,’ replied Biggles. ‘They have no reason to stop; and I could see no reason why we should try to avoid being seen. We’ve no proof that they are concerned with what we are doing. We shall reach the hills, and that must be where they’re making for, long before them. They can’t move any faster.’

The Merlin went on, quickly overtaking the earth-bound travellers. Bertie picked up the binoculars and focused on them.

‘What can you see?’ asked Biggles.

‘Five riders and what seems to be a pack animal, well loaded.’

‘Are they looking up?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘You can’t see a white face?’

‘No. Their heads seem to be muffled up.’

‘If they’re Tuareg they would be. I can’t imagine anyone else doing what they’re doing. The Tuareg wrap their heads in blue veils, which is why the Arabs sometimes call them the People of the Veil. I’m told they never uncover their faces, even to eat. They merely lift the veil.’

‘But aren’t the Tuareg Arabs?’

‘No. They’re a tribe on their own. Some experts have worked it out that they’re the last descendants of the nation that once occupied all this country. That was before it dried up, of course. They have the reputation of being tough fighters — and fast travellers. Here today and gone tomorrow. I don’t think it happens now, but years ago more than one French outpost of the Foreign Legion was wiped out by them.’

‘Then let’s hope we don’t get in each other’s way,’ said Bertie.

The aircraft bored on under the usual implacable sky of deepest blue. The hills came into view, fringing the horizon like the spine of a prehistoric monster.

Ginger put a question to Biggles. ‘Why do you suppose the caravan went

to El Arig before making for the hills, if that's where they're going?'

'Possibly because El Arig was the nearest convenient oasis.'

'There are other oases to the north. According to the map a string of oases runs out into desert from Siwa. They were no use to us because we were told there were no landing grounds; but that wouldn't prevent camels travelling that way.'

'I wouldn't know the answer to that unless it was because other people use those oases. Maybe the men with the caravan coming this way didn't want it known where they were going. In the desert people are curious, and news travels fast. I don't see that it matters, although I must admit it's a bit queer that a caravan should be on its way to a district, where no one ever goes, at the same time as ourselves. From what I could gather at Siwa no one ever came here, one reason being there was no water, and, secondly, there was nothing to come for. Not even Arabs venture into the big sands for no reason whatsoever. But here we are. Keep a sharp lookout for anyone moving, or anything that looks like wheel tracks or a burnt out plane.'

'If by some remote chance Mander should still be alive, surely he'd run into the open to show himself when he heard us,' said Bertie.

'One would think so. He'd realize we could only be a relief plane looking for him. No doubt he'd be mighty glad to see us, because if he should be here it would hardly be from choice. He promised his father he'd keep in touch, and there's every reason to think he'd do that while it was possible. As nothing has been heard of him, we must assume something went wrong. Of course, he may not have got as far as this.'

'And if he didn't?' queried Ginger.

'Then his machine must be on the ground somewhere between here and Siwa, his jumping off place. In that case he couldn't possibly be alive. He wouldn't have a hope. Nor would his partner, Sekunder.'

The Merlin had now reached the hills. They looked much the same as those they had seen the previous day. Some may have been higher, running up perhaps to three or four hundred feet. None was really large enough to be called a mountain, although in comparison with the more or less flat ground from which they sprang, they gave an impression of considerable height. The aircraft, as was intended, made contact with them roughly at the spot where the previous day's search had ended.

The picture presented was a grim one: nothing but masses of rock, large and small, covering an area from half a mile to a mile wide, with sand drifts between them. This chaos was bounded by what looked like cracked, sun-dried mud, quite flat, as if ironed out by running water. There was no sign of life, nothing to support life; no water, not a tree, a bush or a blade of grass.

The rocks, split and cracked by the sun and blasted by wind-driven sand into fantastic shapes, were hideous to behold. Some had been reduced to cones. A common shape was that of a great mushroom, the base having been eaten away to provide a stalk that supported a huge flat cap. Some stood erect,

others leaned at angles as if ready to fall at a touch. Many had in fact fallen. White objects that were judged to be bones could be seen, so scattered that it was not possible to say if they were the remains of man or beast.

Biggles remarked that these suggested that conditions could not always have been as bad as they were now, or they would not have been there.

‘What a hope we’ve got, looking for one particular pinnacle of rock in that mess,’ muttered Ginger.

Biggles answered: ‘Find Mander’s aircraft. If it’s here he won’t be far away from it, alive or dead.’

He flew on, as low as conditions allowed, crossing and recrossing the rock-strewn area, even weaving between the higher hills; attention was also turned to the hard ground outside the rocks, since only on this would it be possible for an aircraft to land. Anywhere else and collision with rock would be inevitable.

‘I wonder what became of those gazelles we saw,’ said Ginger. ‘They must still be about somewhere.’

‘Probably tucked themselves between some rocks where we wouldn’t be able to see them,’ suggested Biggles. ‘I’m not going much farther. I’ve had about enough of this. I’ll do another two or three miles then make for home. One more day should finish the job. I mean, it should see us to the end of the hills, and that’s as much as I intend to do. I’m not starting on the open desert. We haven’t enough petrol for that, anyway.’

Nobody objected, for the ‘bumps’ caused by thermals flung up from the sun-tortured rocks made flying anything but comfortable.

‘What about that caravan?’ questioned Bertie. ‘Aren’t you going to check what it’s doing here?’

‘No. I’m not interested. I don’t see how it can be anything to do with us or what we’re doing. If it’s out on a treasure hunt I wish it joy. As far as I’m concerned it’s welcome to all the emeralds it can find.’

A few minutes later Biggles announced his intention of returning to base. ‘We’ve done about all we could reasonably be expected to do,’ he asserted. ‘How much farther do these confounded rocks go, I wonder? That’s the curse of not having a map; but one can’t get maps of ground that has never been properly surveyed.’

‘Not much point in surveying this lot,’ remarked Bertie. ‘It’ll be some time before these developer chaps, who are knocking things to pieces at home, put up a block of flats here.’

‘Just a minute,’ cut in Ginger, sharply. ‘Carry on for a bit, Biggles. I can see something not far ahead.’

‘Such as what?’

‘It looks like a wisp of smoke.’

‘Oh here, I say, don’t tell me some silly blighter is feeling the cold,’ chuckled Bertie.

Nobody smiled.

‘Have you both lost your sense of humour?’ protested Bertie. ‘That was intended to be a joke.’

‘I’m not in a funny mood at the moment,’ answered Biggles shortly. He was flying along the outside limit of the rocks peering into the glare of the heat-distorted atmosphere ahead.

‘You’re right, Ginger,’ he said presently. ‘That’s smoke.’

‘Then there’s somebody there.’

‘Must be.’

‘What do you make of that?’

‘Unless someone is frying up his breakfast, which doesn’t seem very likely, it can only be a signal.’

‘That means somebody has seen us.’

‘Or heard us. If we’re between him and the eye of the sun, he wouldn’t see us. He’d blind himself if he tried.’

‘I suppose it couldn’t be the caravan people?’

‘No. Definitely. That won’t get here for another forty-eight hours at the earliest.’

‘There he is. I can see him,’ cried Ginger.

The solitary figure that had run out from the rocks into the open, and was now doing a sort of war dance, must have been seen by all of them. In all the landscape it was the only thing that moved.

‘What are you going to do?’ asked Ginger, as the aircraft closed on the gesticulating figure.

‘We shall have to go down.’

‘Make sure first that it’s a white man.’

‘How are we going to do that? No white man could stay white for very long in this climate. We’re the colour of chestnuts ourselves.’

‘But look here, old boy, I don’t see how that could be Mander,’ put in Bertie.

‘Why not?’

‘Where’s his plane? I can’t see one. He wouldn’t go far from it.’

‘There may be an answer to that,’ answered Biggles. ‘I’m going to fly past him at ground level. I shall have to be careful, but you can have a good look. See what you can make of him. I shan’t risk a landing unless I’m sure there’s a good reason.’

The figure, now obviously that of a man, although there was a small chance of it being a woman, apparently satisfied that he had been seen, was now standing still with his arms held high.

Biggles took the Merlin down to within a few feet of the ground and flew past. He did not even glance at the solitary figure. In the bumpy conditions he dare not take his eyes off the ground in front of his wheels.

‘Well?’ he asked as, his purpose accomplished, he eased the stick back.

‘I’d say he’s a white man, but I wouldn’t swear to it,’ was Ginger’s opinion.

‘He’s as dark as an Arab, but I don’t think he is one,’ said Bertie.

‘Never mind the colour of his skin; how was he dressed?’ questioned Biggles. ‘That should tell us what we want to know.’

‘He hadn’t much on,’ informed Ginger.

‘And what he had was mostly rags,’ said Bertie. ‘They looked to me like the remains of an old pair of shorts and a shirt.’

‘Nothing on his head?’

‘Nothing. But he seemed to have plenty of hair.’

‘If Mander has been here for a couple of months you wouldn’t expect his hair to be short,’ returned Biggles. ‘I’m going down. It *must* be either Mander or Sekunder.’

‘How do you make that out?’ demanded Ginger. ‘If they got here surely they’d keep together. Besides, where’s the plane?’

‘That’s what I’m going to find out,’ stated Biggles. ‘The ground looks a bit rough, but it’s flat, and I can’t see anything to do us a mischief. This may be a bit tricky, so don’t speak, anyone.’

Nothing more was said. Biggles brought the machine round and the engines died as he made his approach run. Everyone knew only too well what was at stake. A crack-up, or even the slightest damage to the Merlin, would mean they would be unable to get off again; and that would result in a situation about which it was better not to think.

In the event Biggles made a perfect landing, although the cracks in the ground produced an uncomfortable amount of vibration; and in the still air the machine ran on some way before coming to a stop. Handling the aircraft gently, Biggles brought it round to meet the unknown man who tottered and staggered as he hurried after them.

‘He’s sick, whoever he is,’ remarked Biggles.

‘Who wouldn’t be, in a devil’s cauldron like this?’ murmured Ginger.

The man had fallen before they reached him, but he remained on all fours waving feebly.

Biggles stopped. They all jumped down and hastened to him. His first words proclaimed his nationality. ‘Thank God you’ve come,’ he said huskily, in perfect English. ‘I was just about all in.’

‘Is your name Adrian Mander?’ asked Biggles.

‘Yes. That’s me.’

‘Good. Your father sent us out to look for you. Are you ill?’

‘No. There’s nothing wrong with me except that I’m half-starved to death.’

‘We’ll soon put that right,’ promised Biggles. ‘I’d have thought you’d have been more likely to die of thirst.’

‘No fear of that. There’s water here.’

Biggles looked astonished. ‘The devil there is! Where is it?’

‘I’ll show you.’

‘Never mind. I don’t need it. Where’s Sekunder?’

‘Gone.’

‘Gone where? How?’

‘He pushed off in my plane.’

‘Do you mean he went off, leaving you here?’

‘That’s right.’

‘But didn’t he leave you food, water, and—’

‘He left me nothing. He just left me to die, as he thought. We didn’t know about the water then. He expected to find me dead when he came back.’

‘Is he coming back?’

‘Oh yes. He’ll come back.’ Mander’s voice was bitterly sarcastic.

‘Ah well. Forget it,’ rejoined Biggles. ‘Come on. We’ll get you in the machine and you can pack some grub inside you on the way home.’

‘Thanks. But I’m not going home.’

Biggles looked startled. ‘*What* did you say?’

‘I said I wasn’t going home — not yet, anyway.’

‘You’ve been out in the sun without a hat,’ diagnosed Biggles.

‘Nothing of the sort. If you’ll leave me some grub I shall be all right. You go on home. Now you know where I am, you might come back for me later.’

‘What’s the idea?’

‘I’m not letting that little swine Sekunder get away with this. My guv’nor was right about him.’

‘I suppose you know what you’re saying. I’d have thought you’d had more than enough of this inferno.’

‘I can take a bit more. You get along, unless you care to stay long enough for me to tell you what happened here.’

Biggles shrugged. ‘All right, if that’s how you feel. We’ll do that. An hour one way or the other can’t make much difference as long as you’re getting some food down you. Give a hand, chaps, to get him in the cabin. We’ll get out of the sun, too, or we’re all likely to be round the bend.’

‘I can show you a spot of shade, under a hill,’ offered Mander. ‘It’s no distance and close to the water supply. It’s where I’ve spent most of my time.’

‘You must have got pretty bored,’ said Ginger.

‘On the contrary, I’ve been busy,’ stated Mander.

Ginger looked at Biggles and shook his head sadly.

‘That’s enough talking,’ decided Biggles. ‘Let’s move before we’re fried to a frazzle.’

Mander, who was as weak as a baby, was helped into the aircraft, and under his direction it was taxied slowly into the hills.

CHAPTER 6

ASTONISHING REVELATIONS

The place to which Mander guided the aircraft was anything but attractive, but at least it was dramatic. In some parts of the world it would have been called a canyon. It was, in fact, a gap between two cliffs, both of which had been so worn at the base by erosion that they appeared to overhang. Between a hundred and two hundred feet above, between jagged skylines, the sky showed as a narrow blue slit, and it was evident that except for the brief period when the sun would pass directly over it, the floor of the canyon would be in shade.

This appeared to be loose gravel with a fair sprinkling of larger stones, or, more correctly, rounded pieces of rock, in the manner of a seaside beach.

‘If this isn’t a dried-up water course, I’ve never seen one,’ observed Biggles, looking at it.

‘Water!’ exclaimed Ginger. ‘I thought it *never* rained here.’

‘It rains almost everywhere, even in the Sahara, once in a while,’ answered Biggles. ‘It may only happen once in a century, or more. At least one big motorized expedition was bogged down by flood water. In the middle of the Sahara no allowances had been made for that sort of weather. Of course, the sand and the sun between them soak up the water so quickly that in a short time there’s little sign of what had happened. But still, it *can* happen, although no man in his right mind would rely on it. The closest shave Alexander the Great ever had, and, incidentally, the biggest stroke of luck, was when he got off his course and ran out of water between the coast and Siwa. Just as it looked as if he’d had his chips, it actually rained — rained where, according to the Arabs, not a drop had fallen for more than three hundred years. Obviously it must have rained here at some time or other or there wouldn’t be a water-hole.’

The ground was not so rough as to affect the movement of the aircraft, and it went on nearer to where, some distance farther on where the cliffs were lower and widened out, there stood a few decrepit palms. As there was no movement of air in the canyon it was suffocatingly hot, but — and this was the important thing — it was out of the direct rays of the sun. Biggles remarked with satisfaction that it was a better parking place than he would have expected to find.

‘I’ve had plenty of time to explore,’ said Adrian. ‘I know every hole and corner within a couple of miles.’ He was dunking biscuits in a beaker of meat extract which Ginger had prepared.

‘Take it slowly or you’re liable to get a pain in the tummy,’ advised Biggles. ‘There’s no need to knock your pan out. We’re not in all that hurry. What were you using for food when we arrived?’

‘Well, luckily for me as it happened, we had unloaded some canned stuff for immediate use and that kept me going for a time. After a while I eked it out with dates from those palms you can see down there.’

‘They look pretty dead to me.’

‘Not quite. What few dates they manage to produce are tough going, I can tell you. I couldn’t climb the trees, so I had to make do with fruit that had fallen. It is dry and shrivelled, like old leather. However, they helped me to fill the cracks. I wouldn’t care to try living on dates indefinitely. At first, naturally, I was more worried about water.’

‘Yes. Where did you find water in a place like this?’ asked Biggles curiously. ‘It amazes me that there is any.’

Adrian pointed. ‘It’s down there, at the end of the gully. The cliff has a big cavity under it, almost a short cave, and the middle sinks into a fairly large but shallow pit. I can only imagine it’s seepage from above on the rare occasions when it rains.’

‘That can’t be very often, by the look of things,’ put in Bertie.

‘Anyhow, the great thing is, there’s water. By the way, I have an idea my little reservoir isn’t natural. It has an artificial look about it, as if the people who once lived here either dug the pit or enlarged a hole that was already there. At all events the place must have once been well used, although that may have been a long time ago.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘Because round the water there’s a litter of broken pots and bits of tools that look as if they were made in the Stone Age. I’ve read — and I read a lot about the Sahara before I came here — there are such places in the desert. They’re known only to the Tuareg, who keep the places secret, because this enables them to move about where no one else can follow — after one of their raids, for instance.’

‘Does Sekunder know about this well?’

‘Not as far as I know. I found it after he’d gone.’

‘How on earth did you find it?’

‘That was a bit of luck. On my second day alone I was sitting here in the shade, trying to recover from the shock of what had happened, when some whitish animals appeared at the far end of the gully. Buck of some sort.’

‘Oryx. We saw them.’

‘I couldn’t care less what they are. They did me a good turn. I kept dead still. They seemed to disappear into the face of the cliff. After a while, wondering what had become of them, I walked along. I wasn’t thinking of water, but the sight of some other living things beside myself gave me a spark of hope. They must have heard me, or winded me, and bolted. Their tracks took me to the water-hole. They knew all about it. They saved my life, because I don’t mind admitting that rather than die of thirst I had decided, when the worst came to the worst, to shoot myself.’

‘With what?’

‘My pistol. I had brought one in case of trouble with Arabs. I now had another idea.’

‘What was that?’

‘If I could stalk the deer I’d shoot one of them for food.’

‘Did you?’

‘They’re pretty wary, but waiting by the water-hole I once had them in range. Then I couldn’t bring myself to shoot.’

‘Why not?’

Adrian smiled sheepishly. ‘It may sound silly, but I remembered they’d saved my life. Then again, if they realized there was danger at the water-hole, they wouldn’t dare to come back to it; in which case, if there was no other water in the region, they might die the very death from which they’d saved me. What would you have done?’

Biggles looked blank. ‘A lawyer would call that a leading question. I’ll answer it should the occasion arise. Have you finished eating?’

Adrian grinned weakly. ‘I don’t think I can find room for any more, for the moment.’

‘And how are you feeling now?’

‘Fine. Ready for anything.’

‘Good. In that case you can tell us your whole story from the beginning, so that we shall know exactly how things stand.’

‘I’ll do that,’ agreed Adrian. ‘Everything went according to plan until we got here,’ he began. ‘No bother at all. What you could call a slice of cake. There was one little thing, though, although I thought nothing of it at the time. But I’ll tell you now while I remember it. We stayed at Siwa Oasis for three days. While we were there Sekunder went off several times on his own. He never told me what he was doing, and when I asked him he glossed over the question by saying he’d been making some inquiries about our route.’

‘Did you believe this?’

‘I had no reason to disbelieve it. He had an advantage of me in that he could speak Arabic, or whatever language they use in Siwa, fluently.’

‘Tell me this before we go any further,’ requested Biggles. ‘It seems that Sekunder knew how to fly a plane. Did you know he was a pilot before you started?’

‘No. But you wouldn’t seriously call him a pilot; anyhow, not an experienced one. The first I knew about him having done some flying was when we were crossing the Mediterranean. He asked if he could take over for a bit, and as there was nothing for him to bump into I said yes.’

‘Weren’t you surprised?’

‘Very much. I asked him why he hadn’t told me earlier that he had had some air experience. He said he wasn’t a pilot. He had once taken a few lessons, but he had never qualified. From the way he handled the stick that was pretty obvious. I wouldn’t have allowed him to land or take off.’

‘But he got in a bit of practice.’

‘Yes, you could say that. I corrected his faults and taught him some elementary navigation. He seemed anxious to know how to handle the plane and now I know why. At the time I thought it was all to the good if, in an emergency, he was able to take charge.’

‘Did you come to any conclusion about his nationality?’

‘Seeing no reason why he should lie, I took his word for it that he was an Egyptian. After all, he’d worked for the Egyptian Archaeological Society.’

‘So he said.’

Adrian’s eyebrows went up. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Your father checked up on that. They’d never heard of him.’

‘Why did he have to lie about that?’

‘Presumably to convince you that he was what he pretended to be — a qualified archaeologist. Never mind. Carry on. Sorry I interrupted.’

‘Well, as I was saying, we got here without trouble,’ resumed Adrian.

‘After leaving Siwa we headed south for about two hundred miles following a line of oases which we had been told were now dry. We didn’t land at any of them, having no reason to do so. We didn’t see a living soul all the way. Not that we expected to. No one travels in that direction. Finally we reached these hills, just as Sekunder said we would, striking them at the northern end of the range. We spent a little while exploring from the air, hoping to spot our ultimate objective.’

‘What was that?’

‘The tall pinnacle of rock at the foot of which an ancient king was said to have been buried. I’m sure Sekunder believed that tale, else why should he have come here?’

‘You didn’t see it?’

‘We saw plenty of pointed rocks, but the question was: which was the one we were looking for. We couldn’t go on using petrol, so we decided to land and continue the search on foot. I was a bit nervous about landing, although the ground looked all right. However, I got down okay.’

‘Then what?’

‘I put the machine in the best place I could find, a valley between two hills — not here, a bit farther along. We then unloaded our water bottles and some food, as much as we were likely to need for the next couple of days. I don’t mind admitting that when I saw what we’d taken on I was a bit shaken. It seemed hopeless to search for one particular rock.’

‘Was there any reason why you should decide to land where you did?’

‘Not really. It looked as good a place as anywhere. There were a few palms and some brushwood not far away, although everything looked dead. We thought there was just a chance of finding water, because there must have been some at one time, otherwise there wouldn’t have been any vegetation at all. I believe there were once several oases in these hills.’

‘I see. Then what did you do?’

‘We took a walk. I must say Sekunder was taking the business seriously.’

He was dead keen. Never complained of the heat or anything else. In fact, it was through him that we found the pinnacle and the tomb, just as they had been described.'

Biggles' voice rose in astonishment. 'You found them?'

'Oh yes. That was the following day. We started before dawn, in moonlight, and walked quite a distance. Then, as it was getting light, Sekunder had an idea. Instead of all this walking in and out and around the rocks, he said he'd climb the next hill to have a look round from the top. He went up. I waited. Presently I heard him shouting. He came down so fast that I thought he'd break his neck. He was really excited. He said he could see a tall, leaning spire of rock not far ahead. It must be the one. By this time the sun was up, but we hurried on, and there, lo and behold, it was.'

'What was?'

'The tomb.'

'Was it as conspicuous as that?'

'There was no mistaking it. It couldn't be anything else but a tomb. A mound like the dome of a church built of hand-cut stones fitted so tightly together that you could hardly see the cracks between them. Inscriptions had been carved on the rocks. I'll show it to you presently if you'd care to see it; then you'll understand better than any description I can give you. Not only are there inscriptions, some sort of writing, on the tomb itself, but on rocks all over the place. They may be the tombs of ordinary people. There's one hill covered with them. Some are just holes in the rock. You can see the skeletons and mummified corpses inside. I tell you, at some time a lot of people must have lived here. And this was not all I found.'

Biggles smiled. 'You must have been busy.'

'Don't forget I've been here for close on a couple of months, and as I couldn't get away I've had nothing else to do except explore.'

'What else did you find?'

'An emerald mine.'

Biggles' eyes opened wide. 'You found — an emerald mine?'

'I think so. In one of the hills, not far from the tomb, a big hole, a tunnel in fact, has been driven in. Wondering what it was, I had a look inside. I didn't get far. I came out a lot faster than I went in. It was crawling with snakes. More snakes than you ever saw together in your life. All the snakes for miles around must have collected there when the place went dry. Don't ask me what they live on — unless it's the mummified corpses in the cemetery.'

'Never mind the snakes. What makes you think the place was an emerald mine?'

'Because of the mound of muck outside. It had obviously come from the hole. It glitters with tiny slithers of green crystal. Moreover, there were grooves in the rocks round about as if someone had been polishing something. Take a look at this.' Adrian put a hand in a pocket and produced a piece of semi-transparent rock that shone with a curious translucent glow. 'What do

you make of that?’ he inquired.

Biggles took it and held it up to the light. He nodded and handed it back. ‘I’m no expert on this sort of thing, but I’d say that’s a piece of emerald, badly flawed.’

‘I found it on the dump outside the tunnel,’ said Adrian, as he returned it to his pocket.

‘We’ll have a look at this place presently,’ decided Biggles. ‘For the moment carry on with your story. I’m anxious to hear how Sekunder reacted to the discovery of the tomb.’

‘He doesn’t know anything about the emerald mine. I found that some time after he’d gone.’

‘I gathered that.’

‘And here’s something else I found.’ Again Adrian fished in the pocket of his shorts and now produced a string of beads the size of marbles. They were metal — yellow metal. ‘Feel the weight of that,’ he invited. ‘I’m sure it can only be gold.’ He dropped the necklace, for that clearly was what it was, in the palm of Biggles’ outstretched hand.

‘Where did you find that?’ asked Biggles.

‘It was round the neck of some skin and bones in one of the holes in the cemetery hill. Here, apparently bodies don’t decompose. They get dried out, kippered, by the dry heat.’

‘That’s gold all right,’ said Biggles, handing back the ornament.

‘There must be more where that came from.’

‘No doubt. I wouldn’t bother about it at the moment. You’ve heard the saying, where there’s smoke there’s fire. My version of it is, where there’s gold there’s trouble. Go on with your story. What happened after you and Sekunder found the tomb?’

CHAPTER 7

ADRIAN IS OBSTINATE

Adrian continued his story. 'From that time Sekunder's manner began to change, as if he had something on his mind. I can't describe it in so many words. He turned — well, peculiar. He hardly looked at me. He didn't say much. What he did say was, it would be impossible to open the tomb without tools, and no easy job even with them.'

'Hadn't you brought tools with you?'

'Yes. But not expecting anything like this, and in any case we were limited by weight to what we could bring. All we had was a pick, a spade and a light crowbar. These of course were still in the plane. Naturally, we didn't hump them around with us. Sekunder said he'd go and fetch them. I said I'd go with him to share the load, but he was so insistent that there was no need for us both to go, that rather than argue about it I let him have his way.'

'How far were you from the plane at this time?' asked Biggles.

'I'd say a bit over a mile.'

'Had you any suspicion of Sekunder's intention?'

'Of course not. I thought he was behaving strangely, but I put that down to excitement over finding the tomb. Not for an instant did it occur to me that he would go off on his own, leaving me here. I, too, was all steamed up over what looked like being an important discovery.'

'I can understand that. Carry on.'

'Well, Sekunder went off, leaving me at the tomb. I was copying some of the inscriptions in my notebook when I heard the plane start up. I was surprised but not in the least alarmed, supposing that Sekunder had decided to bring the plane nearer to the place where we would be working. I wasn't happy about that. Knowing he was ham-fisted, I was afraid he might do some damage. However, I hadn't long to worry about that, because the next thing I heard was the plane taking off. I ran out into the open and there it was, already airborne, not coming in my direction, but flying away from the hills. I could hardly believe my eyes. For a moment I thought it must be accidental; that in taxiing he had opened the throttle too wide and let the machine run away with him. But when it continued to fly straight on, climbing, till it was out of sight, I knew it was no use trying to fool myself. He'd gone — deliberately. When it dawned on me what that meant, I felt sick. By leaving me here alone, with no hope of getting away, he had murdered me just as surely as if he had shot me. In fact it would have been kinder to shoot me instead of leaving me to die a miserable death from thirst. Can you imagine a man doing a thing like that?'

Biggles nodded. 'I can. Such people exist and there's a word for them.' He lit a cigarette. 'You thought you were doomed?'

'Of course. Wouldn't you — in a hell on earth like this? What could I do?'

‘What did you do?’

‘My mouth was as dry as a chip from shock, so first of all I had a drink from my water-bottle and did some hard thinking. Then, when I had recovered somewhat, I walked back to the place where the machine had been parked to see if the stuff we had unloaded was still there. Not, as I soon realized, that it would make much difference. It would only prolong the agony. Well, the stuff was there. Apparently he had gone off in too much of a hurry to bother with it. When I had sorted the stuff I reckoned that the food, a few cans and some biscuits, would, if I was careful, last me a week.’

‘It didn’t occur to you that Sekunder might be coming back?’

‘I was sure he wouldn’t be coming back for me. Everything pointed to a deliberate plot to get rid of me. I could manage for a little while on the food, but what was more important was water. We had unloaded one petrol can for immediate use, and that was now half-empty. I was already thirsty — here, as you know, one always is thirsty — and I could have emptied the can at one go. In fact I contemplated doing that. By conserving it — well, it might see me through a couple of days — not more. I kept myself under control and just had a sip. Then, remembering this place, which we had walked through, I brought everything here where there was some protection from the sun. That’s about all. You’ll believe me when I say I didn’t get much sleep that night, knowing what was in store for me.’

Biggles smiled sympathetically. ‘Yes, I can believe that.’

‘I did a lot of thinking,’ went on Adrian. ‘I reached one decision. When I came to the end of my water I would shoot myself. As I sat watching the dawn break, I had what turned out to be the biggest slice of luck any man ever had. Some animals appeared at the far end of the gully. You say they are oryx, and I shan’t argue about that. At first they meant nothing to me, but when I realized what their presence implied, I saw a ray of hope. They couldn’t live without water any more than I could. By showing me the water they solved my major problem. There were two others. The first was food. You must have noticed a few palms. They’re not all dead — not quite, although I imagine it won’t be long before they are. Some still bear a few dates. I couldn’t climb the trees, so I had to make do with what had fallen. They were dry and shrivelled and made pretty tough chewing, but they helped out my daily ration. I managed to knock down a few by throwing rocks, but that was arm-aching work. No wonder the Arabs keep lean if that’s what they live on.’

Biggles smiled again. ‘It’s surprising what one will do at a pinch to keep Old Man Death at a distance. You said two problems. What was the other?’

‘Sekunder. What to do when he came back, if I could live as long as that.’

‘You thought he’d come back?’

‘I was certain of it. What motive could he have had for murdering me — for that’s what it amounted to — if he didn’t intend coming back?’

‘Now you’ve had plenty of time to think, what do you suppose was his

motive?’

‘I think that’s pretty obvious. He wasn’t sharing what we’d found with me or anyone else. He wanted the lot. If there’s treasure in the tomb he’ll keep it. If there’s nothing of value he’ll claim credit for the discovery.’

‘To do that he’d have to account for your disappearance,’ Biggles pointed out. ‘It’s known you started together.’

‘Forget it. He’d have no difficulty in dreaming up a cock-and-bull story to account for my death. Who would disbelieve him if he said I’d gone off on my own, lost my way in the desert — as can easily happen — and perished from thirst? No one could disprove it, even my father, if he was suspicious.’

‘If there is treasure in the tomb Sekunder would be bound by law to hand it over to the government.’

‘Don’t make me laugh. Not him — oh no. I can’t see him doing that, not after what he’s done to me. He’ll smuggle the stuff to a black market and put the money in his pocket. That must have been his scheme all along. Having had time to think, I’ve remembered little things, such as his behaviour in Siwa, where he went off several times without me. I believe now he was fixing something with somebody. Why didn’t he tell me he’d done some flying? By the time I knew that it was too late to turn back. I’d say it boils down to this. If we found nothing we’d go home and report failure. That would have cost him nothing. If we found something of cash value he’d get rid of me and keep everything for himself. Does that make sense to you?’

‘Yes, I think that just about sums up the situation,’ agreed Biggles. ‘You’re assuming he was able to take your machine to some point that suited him. I don’t think it could have been Siwa, or we’d have heard of him.’

‘Probably one of the abandoned oases on the way, nearer than Siwa. I think he’d manage that. It would be a perfectly straight flight. I’d already worked out a compass bearing for Siwa and he knew that. I gave it to him as a precautionary measure in case I had an accident.’

‘Very wise. How do you think he’ll come back? Fly?’

‘I doubt it. He may not trust his navigation to that extent. The plane had served its purpose. The tomb had been located. There’d be no need for him to hurry. As long as I had had time to die he could come back any old time, in any way that suited him. Perhaps by camel, which would enable him to bring more effective tools for opening the tomb.’

‘Camels cost money. He’d need several. If he couldn’t afford a plane, which I imagine was why he took you into partnership, where would he get the money to buy camels?’

‘Oh, he’d get over that by taking someone into his confidence, as he took me. He may have made arrangements before we started. At that time he didn’t know where the tomb was, or in fact if there really was one. Now he knows it’s here, and exactly where it is. That makes a lot of difference. He’s a slick talker. He’d raise the cash, whether or not the man who put up the money came here with him.’

‘You seem to have got it all worked out.’ Biggles smiled as he lit another cigarette.

‘As I’ve said, I’ve had plenty of time to think. There wasn’t much else I could do. Had it been possible I would have broken into the tomb and taken out, and hidden, any treasure. That would have queered his pitch. But I could do nothing with my bare hands. The tools were in the machine.’

‘How do you know?’

‘Well, I can only suppose they were. We didn’t unload them. Why do you question it?’

‘Only a minor point. The thought struck me that if Sekunder knew he was coming back, why take home a load of tools that might be useful here?’

‘I didn’t think of that.’

‘Did you look for them in case he put them out and hid them somewhere?’

‘No. To open up that mass of rock will be a big job. Sekunder knows that. We discussed it. He suggested a stick of dynamite would do the trick. You can be sure that when he comes back he’ll be fully equipped for the operation.’

‘He’s not likely to come alone.’

‘I realize that.’

‘And you still insist on staying here?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘Then tell me this. What do you intend to do when he turns up?’

‘That will depend on how many men he brings with him. I shall have one big advantage, don’t forget. Assuming I’m dead, he won’t give me a second thought. I’ll watch my chance to catch him alone, and then...’

‘Then what?’

‘I’ll shoot him. I’ve got a gun.’

Bertie broke in. ‘Jolly good. That’s the stuff. Give the skunk what he deserves.’

Biggles was frowning. ‘Here, just a minute. Never mind what he deserves — you’d better think twice before you take the law into your own hands.’

‘Law! What law?’ demanded Adrian hotly. ‘What’s the use of talking about law in a place like this? Sekunder didn’t worry about the law, so why should I?’

‘Take my advice and have another think, because you haven’t much time. Unless I’m barking up the wrong tree you’ll soon be seeing him.’

Adrian looked hard at Biggles’ face. ‘What do you mean by that?’

‘There’s a six-camel caravan heading in this direction now.’

‘The devil there is! How do you know?’

‘We overtook it on our way here. We’ve good reason to remember it.’

‘How so?’

‘We’ve reason to suppose they were responsible for burning our camp at El Arig. We came here yesterday looking for you, but we were a bit too far south. When we got back to El Arig we found someone had called there and sabotaged our gear. That included half our reserve of petrol. Why anyone

should do that was a mystery to us, but now we've heard your story it begins to add up.' Biggles related in detail what had happened at El Arig. 'Obviously, someone wanted us out of the way,' he concluded.

'That sounds like Sekunder,' declared Adrian. 'Well, let him come. That suits me. The sooner the better. It seems I wasn't far out in my weighing up of the situation.'

'That's how it looks to me,' agreed Biggles.

'Good. With luck I shall be able to square things with that double-crossing little rat.'

'Don't you think it would be wiser to forget the whole thing and come home with us before the caravan gets here?' suggested Biggles gently.

'Not on your sweet life,' retorted Adrian.

'This is no place to start a shooting match. What if Sekunder has a bunch of Tuareg with him?'

'I don't care who he has with him. He's not getting away with this.'

'With what? Are you thinking about the treasure?'

'I don't care two hoots about that. I still have some self-respect. If I ran away it'd look as if I was afraid of him — and my guv'nor wouldn't hesitate to say so.'

'You know the old saying. He who runs away...'

'I know — I know. Lives to fight another day. I'll do my fighting now, thank you. There's no need for you to get mixed up in this. It's my affair. If that's how you feel, you can push off and leave me to it. Just leave me some grub, that's all I ask.'

Biggles' frown deepened. 'Now you're talking foolishly. And don't you talk to me in that tone of voice. Your father sent us here to fetch you, and when I go you'll go with me, dead or alive — probably dead if you persist in the mood you're in now. You're in no state to take on a bunch of cut-throats and you know it.'

'Sorry,' said Adrian contritely. 'I'm a bit steamed up. I realize you're talking sense. What's the size of the caravan you saw?'

'Six camels and, we think, five men. We were flying high when we saw it.'

'When do you reckon it'll get here?'

'Tomorrow evening at the earliest.'

'That gives us time to breathe. May I make a suggestion?'

'Of course.'

Tomorrow morning, early, before sun-up, I'll show you the tomb. You can tell me what you make of it. That's if you insist on staying here with me.'

'I'm not leaving you here alone.'

'Okay. Have it your way.'

'Are you feeling better now you've got some food inside you?'

'Much, thank you. By tomorrow I'll be back to normal. I still have a bit of weight to make up.'

'Fair enough,' said Biggles. 'Now let's see about getting organized.'

Adrian looked worried. 'I'll leave that to you. There's one thing about this I don't like.'

'What is it?'

'If anything should happen to your machine you'd be stuck here.'

'So would you,' returned Biggles dryly. 'Don't think I've overlooked that.'

'What do you mean about getting organized, old boy?' inquired Bertie. 'I mean to say, what is there to organize?'

'If, as I suspect, there's going to be a spot of bother here presently, we'd better get acquainted with the general layout of the place. For a start I want to have a look at Adrian's water-hole, because that might well become the decisive factor in any trouble. The side that controls the water supply will hold the trump card.'

'Sekunder knows nothing about that,' reminded Adrian.

'Not at this moment perhaps. How long do you suppose it will take him to find it? When he discovers you're still alive, he'll realize there must be water here somewhere. Of course he'll have water with him; but probably not more than he thinks he'll need for a short stay. If, as we may suppose, he's brought the right tackle to dismantle the tomb, he'll reckon to have done the job and be on his way home in a couple of days.'

'How are you going to prevent him getting to the water?' questioned Ginger.

'If we move the machine down in front of the cave, or whatever it is, he may keep clear. It depends on how he behaves. Remember, we shall have to guard the aircraft as well as the water, so the closer they are together, the better.'

'So you'll move your plane along to the water?' asked Adrian.

'I think it would be the sensible thing to do. The plane and the water could then be guarded together.'

'There shouldn't be any difficulty about that. What else?'

'I'd like to have a look at the place where you parked your machine.'

'Why?'

'Sekunder may have left a clue as to his intentions.'

'I didn't notice anything.'

'I imagine, in the state you were, you didn't look very hard.'

'When will you do this?'

'Right away. I'd rather not go out in the sun as it is at present, but we've no time to waste.'

'What about the tomb?'

'That will have to wait till the morning. We'll start early, as you suggested.' Biggles got up. 'Let's get on with it.'

They all got back into the Merlin and he took it along the ravine, under Adrian's direction, to where the foot of the cliff fell back to form a broad, shallow cave. They got out and Adrian led the way to the pool of clear water about a foot deep, ten feet long and half as wide.

‘This can’t be natural,’ decided Biggles, looking around. ‘There may have been a bit of a cavity originally, big enough to hold some of the water that dripped through a flaw in the rock when it rained. The people who once lived here, noticing that, simply had to enlarge it. They’ve gone, but their descendants, the Tuareg, may know of it. They, wisely no doubt, keep such knowledge to themselves. The oryx found it, as a camel will find water if there’s any about, either by smell or an instinct we don’t understand. You say they haven’t been back, Adrian?’

‘I haven’t seen them.’

‘Then there may be other water-holes in the hills and they’ve moved off to one of them. Well, that seems to be all there is to see here; let’s have a drink and go on to where you parked your aircraft. When we come back we’ll top up our water cans.’

They set off, Adrian again leading. The sun was now well over its zenith, but the heat was still devastating, particularly when they left the shade of the silent canyon for more open ground. No one spoke, aware that in such conditions it is wise to conserve moisture in the mouth by keeping it shut.

After half an hour of steady plodding Adrian stopped. ‘Here we are,’ he said. ‘This is it.’

At first glance there was little enough to see: wheel tracks and a few old dead-looking palms rising from drifted sand between a wilderness of rocks. The sand near to where the wheel tracks ended, that being apparently where Adrian’s plane had been parked, had been well trampled; but the sand, being light and bone dry, showed no definite foot-marks that could be identified. It was like seaside sand above the high-water mark, never washed by the waves.

For perhaps a minute Biggles stood still, studying the ground. Then he walked to where a little mound of sand had heaped itself over the mass of fibrous roots thrown out by a thirsty palm. He kicked some of the sand aside. He groped in it with his hands. They came out empty. He went to another palm and did the same thing. Again he drew blank. After gazing around with speculative eyes, he went a little way to where some dead palm fronds had apparently been blown against a small patch of sun-dried acacia scrub. Stooping, he dragged aside some of the accumulated debris. Then, reaching down, he pulled out a spade and threw it clear. A pickaxe and an iron bar followed. He looked at Adrian, but did not speak.

‘I call that very clever of you,’ complimented Adrian. ‘I would never have thought of it.’

‘Just common sense,’ returned Biggles. ‘Why should Sekunder lug home something that might be useful on a future occasion? The things may not be of much use to us, but as he may be relying on them as part of his equipment, we’ll see he doesn’t get them. We’ll take them to the aircraft. They can go in the cabin. That’s all. I can see nothing else here of interest, so let’s get back out of this blistering sun.’

‘If we wanted proof that Sekunder intended to return, this is it,’ remarked

Adrian as, carrying the implements between them, they made their way back to the Merlin.

‘We didn’t really need proof,’ answered Biggles. ‘I’d say it was a certainty.’

‘Are you going to have a look at the tomb?’

‘Not now,’ decided Biggles. ‘Too much of this sun could knock us flat. A touch of sunstroke wouldn’t help matters. The tomb can wait till morning.’

They all had a drink and found seats in the shade.

Presently Adrian said thoughtfully: ‘If Sekunder is with that caravan you saw coming this way, he must also have seen you.’

‘Of course,’ agreed Biggles.

‘As you haven’t gone back, he must know you’re still here.’

‘Presumably.’

‘He’ll guess why you’ve come here.’

‘No doubt. For what other reason would a plane come to a place like this? But there’s still one thing, an important one, that he doesn’t know, and isn’t likely to imagine.’

‘What’s that?’

‘That you’re still alive and well and so able to tell us what sort of low crook he is. Until we see how he shapes, I don’t want him to see you. He can suppose we’ve stayed on looking for your dead body. Of course, we’ve no proof that Sekunder is with the caravan, so let’s not jump to conclusions until that has been established. We shan’t have long to wait.’

They sat on discussing the situation until the sun died in the spectacular blaze of colour that only desert countries can produce. The temperature fell sharply with it, although as the sand and rocks gave off the heat they had absorbed during the day, the air was not as cold as it would be when, towards dawn, this was exhausted. During the brief twilight they had a meal, Biggles doling out rations from their depleted stores.

The moon soared up, huge, magnificent, a silver ball in a sky ablaze with stars, seeming to intensify the silence, the sort of silence that comes from a complete and utter absence of sound; which is something that never happens, cannot happen, in what is called civilization.

Biggles stubbed his cigarette in the sand. ‘I’m going to turn in and get some sleep while the sand is warm,’ he announced. ‘We’ll make an early start. We shan’t need waking. Without blankets the cold will see to that.’

CHAPTER 8

THE TOMB

Ginger was not sorry when, some time before dawn, he heard Biggles moving, for the thin air was so perishing that it seemed impossible he could be in the same world in which he had gone to sleep. He rose stiffly. It was not yet daylight. The moon, having completed its journey across the heavens, had departed, and with it had gone the grotesque shadows it had cast. The stars were losing their brilliance. The only sound was a cheerful one; the hum of the spirit stove which Biggles had lighted to boil a kettle of water.

Bertie sat up. 'This cold is murder,' he groaned. 'Why did I leave my woollies at home? Give me tea, good old tea, to thaw my poor old bones.'

'Get up and help yourself,' invited Biggles. 'You're not in an hotel.'

Bertie dragged himself to his feet, his teeth chattering. 'You needn't tell me, old boy. I can see that for myself.'

'Then quit moaning and make yourself useful.'

After this exchange of pleasantries the bivouac was soon busy. A quick breakfast and, with the false dawn throwing its pallid light over the scene, the party was ready to move off.

'What about the tools?' asked Ginger. 'Are we taking them with us?'

Biggles answered by putting a question to Adrian. 'How far have we to go?'

'About a mile and a half.'

'Then as you say the tools aren't much use, we needn't hump them with us. If we did decide to use them we could fetch them. Listen, Adrian. You've still time to change your mind about staying here. Are you sure you wouldn't rather pack it in and go home while the going's good?'

'No. I'm seeing this business through.'

Biggles shrugged. 'Very well. Let's go. You lead the way.'

The party set off, each man carrying a water-bottle slung over his shoulder.

Reaching the end of the chasm, where the cliffs broke down to open, rock-strewn ground, they paused to survey the scene in the direction from which the caravan would approach. Nowhere in the miles and miles of sand that rolled away to the pitiless distances was there a living creature; not a movement. The face that the dunes turned to the sky was one of a world that had died, long, long ago.

'They can't get here before sunset at the earliest,' said Biggles pensively. 'Look at that desert. Someone must have a thundering good reason for coming here. I wouldn't cross it on foot for all the crown jewels in the Tower of London.'

They went on for about a mile, by which time the rim of the sun, a fiery orange, was showing over the edge of the horizon. On the way Biggles

pointed out what he thought were old river beds or gullies caused by storm water.

‘You might as well have a look at this, in passing,’ said Adrian, turning away from the desert to some rising ground on their right.

A short walk brought into view a yawning cavern which had from its regular shape been dug by men into the side of a hill. Outside and all around lay the heaps of debris from the excavation. ‘My emerald mine,’ went on Adrian, with a curious smile. ‘I wouldn’t go too close. The cave is lousy with snakes, and from the way they came at me they don’t like visitors. There are more up there.’ He pointed to a slope above the cave. It was spotted with holes like a great rabbit warren. ‘That’s where the people who lived here buried their dead. It looks as if they just pushed the bodies into a hole and left them to dry out.’

‘Is that where you found the gold necklace?’ asked Ginger.

‘That’s the place.’

‘Then there may be more.’

‘Without a doubt. I only looked in one hole, out of sheer curiosity, wondering what had made it. When the snakes started to appear, hissing like a lot of wild cats, I lost no time in removing myself. I can only imagine it was the vibration of my footsteps that disturbed them.’

‘It must be a very long time since anyone came here,’ remarked Biggles, thoughtfully. ‘With grave robbing a regular profession in North Africa — and other places in the Old World if it comes to that — one would have thought these would have been ransacked long ago.’

‘Maybe the snakes discouraged them,’ offered Adrian.

‘That may be the answer. Does Sekunder know about this?’

‘I don’t think so. I found it after he’d gone. Are you going to have a closer look?’

‘No. Well, certainly not now. This is no time or place to fiddle about with a colony of vipers. I’m more concerned with the big tomb, so that I shall know what Sekunder will be up against when he tackles it. Let’s press on while the sand is still cool.’

They continued on their way, Adrian sometimes pointing out inscriptions carved on rocks where flat surfaces made it possible.

By the time the so-called leaning pinnacle came into view the sun was up and the sky its usual unbroken blue. As Bertie remarked, pinnacle was the right word. A needle of coal-black rock, some fifty feet high, blunt at the base but tapering to the apex, thrust upward like a warning signal. They went on to it, and there at the foot was the tomb. Or what was thought to be a tomb, although there was not much reason to doubt it.

It was an extraordinary structure and Adrian had not exaggerated its massive strength. In general appearance it took the form of a giant pudding basin, inverted. Its diameter at the base might have been twenty feet; its height, half that. It was built of what were obviously hand-cut rocks, not all

the same size, but none, for a rough guess, weighing less than half a hundredweight. The rocks had been beautifully fitted together, without mortar, so that the joins hardly showed, making it evident that the masons who had done the job were craftsmen of a high order. There were inscriptions everywhere, but being in an unknown language they conveyed no information. There was no door, nothing to show there had ever been an entrance. They walked round it, examining it closely, to make sure.

‘The whole bally thing might be solid,’ said Bertie.

Adrian answered. ‘I’d say it’s a hollow sepulchre. That’s how it was with others that have been found farther north.’

No one argued about this.

The dome-shaped tomb and the tall finger of rock close to it gave the whole thing the appearance of a primitive mosque. The rock, clearly, was a natural formation, although to what extent time and the weather had been responsible for its present shape it was impossible to say. The sides were smooth, almost polished. But the most striking — one might say alarming — feature of the spire was the way it leaned towards the tomb; indeed, hung over it. Poised at such an angle, it looked as if a touch would send it crashing down. What would happen if it did fall was a matter for surmise. It might splinter, break to pieces, or it might by its weight crush the dome flat, making examination even more difficult.

‘Well, what do you make of it?’ inquired Adrian, looking at Biggles.

‘What can one make of it? I must say I don’t like the look of that cockeyed rock. A shake would send it over. Have you touched it?’

‘No.’

‘Did Sekunder?’

‘No, although he thought it more secure than it appeared.’

‘How did he propose to get into the tomb?’

‘At first he said what we really needed was a crane.’

‘Ha! That’s a good one. How did he think he could get a crane to a place like this?’

‘That’s what I asked him. Then he talked of fetching some dynamite to blow the whole thing open.’

‘Dynamite! He must be out of his mind. That rock wouldn’t stand up to the shake of an explosion. I wouldn’t care to let off a squib near it.’

Adrian agreed.

Biggles went on. ‘I can’t believe this was the original set-up. Why put a tomb in such a dangerous place? For what possible reason? No. I’d say that rock at one time stood erect, to mark the spot, like a tombstone. Either the sand on which it stands has shifted, causing it to lean as it does, or else wind-blown sand has scoured it into that shape and position.’

‘Well, what can be done about it?’

‘Don’t ask me. Frankly, I’m not interested. I came here to find you, not mess about with ancient monuments. Now, having done that, if I wasn’t as

dim-witted as an old hen I'd be on my way home. As far as this tomb is concerned one thing sticks out like a bandaged thumb. Even if we were prepared to risk being crushed as flat as flounders by working on the tomb, the tools we have would be about as useful as a toothpick on a tin of sardines. Anyway, I'd think twice before I started hammering on those stones, with a hundred tons of rock hanging over my head.'

'You aren't very helpful,' complained Adrian.

'Maybe not, but I hope I'm talking sense. A gold bucket full of emeralds wouldn't be much use if you were spread-eagled on your back with that lump of rock lying across your chest. At the moment I'd be happier with a galvanized iron bucket full of bacon and eggs. But why talk nonsense? Let's go home.'

'Just a jiffy,' put in Bertie. 'I've got an idea.'

'Spill it. We could do with one.'

'How about digging a tunnel under the bally thing and coming up inside? It's only standing on sand.'

Biggles looked pained. 'Have a heart! How long would that take? Sekunder may be here tomorrow. Besides, how do we know it's built on sand? There may be rock below. I'm no miner, anyway, and I can't see any of us wielding a pick and shovel in this heat.'

'I see what you mean, old boy,' said Bertie sadly, rubbing his monocle. 'Funny how my ideas never seem to click.'

Adrian looked at Biggles suspiciously. 'I'm getting the impression that you don't care whether we get inside the tomb or not.'

'You're dead right,' answered Biggles. 'I never did think much of this business of digging up dead men's bones. If they go to the trouble of building themselves a cosy grave, they have every right to lie in it undisturbed. People who come along and dig them up for the sake of the things that were buried with them are thieves just as much as those who rob the living. That's how I see it. You asked for it, now I've told you.'

'I don't want their money,' retorted Adrian.

'Then what are we doing here?'

'I'm devoted to archaeology. How are we going to find out about the past if we don't dig?'

'It's time we started talking about the future.'

'What future?'

'Tomorrow. What are we going to do when that camel convoy arrives? If it happens to be a stray party of Tuareg, maybe they'll just ignore us. But if it's a gang organized by Sekunder, the situation could get ugly. Look, Adrian. You're the one who wants to stay here. Perhaps you'll tell me exactly what you're going to do when you come face to face with your late partner — bearing in mind that we've only enough food to last a day or two?'

'Sekunder will be in the same position, only his problem will be water. Those camels can only carry so much. They've made the long journey here.

They'll have to hold enough in reserve to get back to where they came from. So none of us will be able to stay here long. I imagine Sekunder will come straight here. When he arrives I shall be waiting for him.'

'And get yourself shot? That doesn't sound very intelligent to me.'

'I shall behave as if nothing had happened. I shall pretend to be delighted to see him. I shall say I always knew he'd come back, and congratulate him on wasting no time in going home to fetch the tools for the job.'

'Do you seriously suppose you'll get away with that line of bluff?'

'Why not? What can he say? He's not likely to admit that his real intention was to murder me.'

'Then what?'

'I'll see how he shapes. I shall co-operate with him in opening the tomb.'

'If he'll let you.'

'We shall see. If he cuts up rough — well, I've always got my gun.'

'He'll know you must have found water.'

'So what?'

'He'll demand to be told where it is. It's going to take him some time to pull down this pile of rocks, and with his water problem solved he wouldn't have to hurry. Let's suppose you get away with your bluff and he lets you help him open up the tomb. Then what will he do? Invite you to take half of what you find? Forget it. He'll do, or try to do, what he did before. Go off, leaving you here. He'd know you wouldn't have a hope of ever getting home.'

'That's supposing he hasn't seen your plane.'

'I'm hoping he won't see it. I imagine he'll stay here, where the job is. Why should he go anywhere else?'

'If the worst comes to the worst we'll have a showdown,' argued Adrian. 'I can take care of myself.'

'I wouldn't gamble on that. Don't forget you're dealing with an unscrupulous rogue, prepared, as he has already demonstrated, to commit murder. It seems to me that you're deliberately looking for trouble.'

'I'm prepared for it. So would you be if Sekunder had done to you what he did to me. I can cause trouble, too.'

'How?'

'I might stampede the camels. Then it would be Sekunder's turn to stay here, or try walking home.'

Biggles looked worried. He shook his head. 'I don't like this at all.'

'What do you suggest I do? Have you an alternative?'

'Look at the thing from my angle. Here I am, in a position to do what I came here to do, which is take you home. You refuse flatly to come. Very well. You ask for an alternative to your scheme for bringing matters to a head right away. I'd like to think that over, but as I see it now I think you'd do better to stay with us, and keep out of sight until we've seen the composition of the caravan, made sure that Sekunder is with it and watch how he goes to work. He may not know the location of the water supply, but if he has Tuareg

with him they might. There's little they don't know about the desert. We shall soon see.'

'Let's leave it like that for the moment,' agreed Adrian.

'Good,' acknowledged Biggles. 'It's too hot to stand here talking, so let's get back to the aircraft before the soles of our feet are blistered. We'll need to remain mobile.'

As they walked back to the canyon in the fierce heat Ginger said: 'I wonder what became of those oryx we saw, now the poor little beasts can't get to the water-hole for fear of us.'

Biggles answered. 'I don't think we need worry about them. They can take care of themselves. They may know of another water supply in these hills, perhaps some distance away; failing that they may have moved off to one of the unknown oases thought to be in that part of the desert not yet explored. They have the reputation of being able to travel long distances without a drink.'

They reached the aircraft, quenched their thirst and with sighs of relief settled down in the shade.

The rest of the day passed quietly, the conversation being mostly of archaeology in general and the ancient tomb in particular.

Said Adrian lugubriously: 'You can imagine how frustrated I feel that having found the tomb I can do nothing about it. Can't any of you think of a way of getting into it?'

Biggles shook his head. 'At the moment I wouldn't know where to start; however, I'm still thinking about it.'

Bertie spoke: 'What we really need is the sort of trumpet old Joshua used to carry. That's the tool for a job like this.'

Ginger looked up. 'I don't get it.'

'Oh come — come,' reproved Bertie. 'Don't say you've forgotten how, when he blew his bugle, the walls of Jericho came tumbling down?'

'I don't think that's very funny,' observed Biggles moodily. 'I doubt if the walls of Jericho were built like that tomb, which I suspect was here before Joshua was born.'

'You know, old boy,' rejoined Bertie sadly, 'you're losing your sense of humour.'

'Who wouldn't, in this infernal frying-pan?' concluded Biggles, wearily.

CHAPTER 9

AN EXPERIMENT THAT WORKED

The following morning they were again on the move early, not so much because there was something to be done, as because dawn was the only time of the day when the torrid heat that followed it was bearable. Nothing had been decided. There had been some talk of trying to break into the tomb with the tools at their disposal, but Biggles had opposed it on the grounds that even if they made some impression they would not be able to finish the job before the caravan arrived. This could happen within a matter of hours, and it was hardly likely they would be allowed to continue in peace. Moreover, should Sekunder arrive with an armed force, any work they had done would probably be to his advantage.

Ginger suggested a sortie in the Merlin to locate the exact position of the caravan; but this Biggles also opposed in view of the petrol position. As he reminded them, in such climatic conditions they might be losing petrol all the time by evaporation. Instead, he asked Ginger to climb the nearest convenient hill to reconnoitre the desert from the top.

This Ginger did, and returned to say the caravan was not yet in view; but as he had had to face the glare of the rising sun, he could not swear to it.

‘So the position remains the same as yesterday,’ observed Biggles. He went on: ‘I’m almost sorry we have an ample water supply here.’

Adrian looked astonished. ‘That’s an extraordinary thing to say. Why?’

‘Because had the water supply dried up we should have to go home whether you liked it or not. That would be the sensible thing to do. I still can’t see your object in remaining here. It’s bound to end in trouble.’

‘I’m not afraid of Sekunder,’ stated Adrian curtly.

‘So you’ve said, and I believe you. Well, I am. People who provoke snakes are liable to be bitten. If it comes to fighting, as it may unless you calm down, someone is likely to get hurt, and this is no place to have a casualty on our hands. And it isn’t only Sekunder I’m thinking about. Remember where we are. The weather at the moment is settled, but it won’t necessarily remain so. This sort of country is a hazard in itself, and every hour we spend here exposes us to what the desert can do. A *haboob*, as they call sand-storms in these parts, can last for days. There would be no question of flying, and in forty-eight hours we shall be out of food.’

‘I haven’t asked you to stay,’ said Adrian.

‘What do you expect me to do? Go and tell your father that we found you and then returned home without you? He’d think we were a bright lot.’

‘Tell him the truth. Say I refused to leave. He knows how obstinate I can be.’

‘I’ve noticed that myself. I can’t see what you hope to gain. You say

you're not interested in any possible treasure. You've taken copies of the inscriptions. What *do* you want?

'I'm not letting that murdering little swine Sekunder get away with this. I'm going to have it out with him. He pinched my aircraft.'

'I can understand how you feel,' conceded Biggles. 'But I hope you realize that if you had a row which ended with you killing him, the rest of his party — if they didn't kill you — would report you for murder.'

'That's okay with me.'

Biggles shook his head. 'All right. Have it your way. I've had dealings with some mulish customers in my time, but for sheer cross-grained stubbornness you take the palm.' He sighed. 'If there's going to be a rough house we might as well be ready for it. Ginger, fetch three pistols from the magazine in the machine, and a few spare clips of cartridges. Adrian doesn't need one. He has his own.'

Ginger fetched the weapons and they were distributed.

Bertie spoke. 'You know, chaps, I've been thinking.'

'Good,' encouraged Biggles. 'I was hoping someone would do that. I've done enough.'

'If Sekunder is on his way here from the desert, he'll march straight to the leaning tower over the grave of King what's-his-name. You said yourself it makes a conspicuous landmark. He'll see it from miles away.'

'What of it?'

'He'll be relying on it being there to give him his direction.'

'Well?'

'If the bally thing wasn't there he'd be all at sea, so to speak. I mean to say, he might arrive at the hills in the wrong place and have to hunt up and down for the tomb.'

Biggles frowned. 'What are you talking about — if it wasn't there? It *is* there.'

'It needn't be.'

'So you're going to take it down and hide it somewhere.' Biggles was frankly sarcastic.

'I have a scheme for knocking it down — and before you give one of your low, coarse laughs you might hear what it is. I know my brainwaves don't often click, but I see no reason why this one shouldn't. That's if you agree it might upset Sekunder's apple-cart if the landmark wasn't there.'

'I'm listening,' said Biggles seriously, winking at Ginger.

'You won't dispute that from the way the bally thing leans, it wouldn't take much knocking over?'

'I'm with you there. So you're going to push it over?'

'Not me, old boy. Not me. No fear. I'm not that crazy. I can do better than that. If you remember the ground behind the spire rises pretty steeply. Quite a slope, in fact.'

'Full of holes, which Adrian says are full of snakes.'

‘Never mind the snakes. If you’re going to throw sand in my gears before I’ve finished, I’ll say no more about it.’

‘Sorry. Go on.’

‘Lying on that slope are some pretty hefty boulders. Right?’

‘Right.’

‘If we gave one a shove and sent it bowling down the hill it would knock over the steeple.’

‘If it hit the target. But it’s a big if.’

‘If we didn’t hit the mark with the first one we could go on trying. There are plenty of rocks. With the pick and the crowbar it shouldn’t be hard to send them down the bowling alley — in a manner of speaking.’

Biggles was looking interested. ‘You know, Bertie, silly though it seems, I believe you’ve got something.’

‘The great thing is, we’ve nothing to lose,’ went on Bertie, warming up to his subject now that he had made his point. ‘I mean to say, if we can’t hit the mark we shall be no worse off. If we could knock it over it might upset Sekunder’s calculations. We might as well be doing something as squat here all day on our haunches twiddling our thumbs. We may lose a little sweat, but we shall do that anyway when the sun gets cracking.’

Biggles looked at Adrian. ‘What do you think about it?’

‘If you think it’ll do any good I’m all for it. But I thought you said that if the rock fell across the tomb it might smash it flat.’

‘So it could, unless it broke to pieces. Something would have to give.’

‘That wouldn’t make it any easier for us to get inside the tomb.’

‘It wouldn’t make it any easier for Sekunder, either. He’d have to do some fresh thinking.’

‘Yes, I see that,’ agreed Adrian dubiously. ‘But all this sounds to me no more than a delaying tactic. Sekunder will find the place eventually.’

‘Yes, as you say, eventually. But how long can Sekunder afford to stay here? After such a journey as he has just made, he won’t have much water left by the time he gets here; certainly none to spare, bearing in mind that he’ll have to keep enough in hand to get home. That, of course, is assuming that he doesn’t know of a water-hole here.’

‘I’m pretty sure from the way he talked that he didn’t reckon on finding water here. But I don’t see how all this is going to help us.’

‘If he can’t find water he won’t be able to stay here more than a day or two. The camels will have to start for home tanked up, or they’d never get across the desert. Maybe Sekunder thinks a few hours here will be as much time as he needs for what he hopes to do.’

‘All right. So he comes and goes. That would leave us just as we are now,’ argued Adrian.

‘Oh no. We shall have gained time, and that, next to water, is the most vital commodity. If Sekunder had to pull out it would leave us free to do anything we liked. We can cover a hundred miles while he’s doing one.’

‘Fair enough,’ conceded Adrian. ‘Have it your way. I’ll not argue about it. I’m not normally vindictive, but I’m game for anything that might throw Sekunder’s scheme out of gear.’

Biggles got up. ‘Fine. And so say all of us, so let’s have a bash at the leaning tower to see if we can rock it off its pedestal. As Bertie has said, sitting here won’t get us anywhere. Get the tools out.’

Water-bottles were shouldered and the party set off.

Twice on the way to the tomb one of them climbed on a high rock to survey the desert for sight of the caravan; but the miles of rolling sand lay dead under heaven.

They found the tomb and its guardian spire as they had last seen them; not that there was any possibility of change unless the leaning rock fell of its own accord. For a minute they stood considering it in silence, each regarding it in his own way. It occurred to Ginger, for the first time, that what they were contemplating might be an act of vandalism: and he voiced his thought.

Adrian brushed it aside. ‘It’s all a matter of age, of time,’ he averred. ‘No decent person would desecrate a modern grave, but prehistoric things are somehow different. Don’t ask me why. But all over the world ancient monuments and tombs are being excavated in the search for knowledge of the people who occupied the world before history was written. It doesn’t mean disrespect and it can do them no harm. In Egypt they’re building a dam that will drown much of their ancient civilization.’

Said Biggles pensively: ‘As I got it from your father, Adrian, according to the story Sekunder got from the old Arab, and which he passed on to you, this is the tomb of a certain King Ras Tenazza who ruled over the Tuareg Empire — or the people who were here before them. It was put here so that when one day the pinnacle fell, the tomb would be buried for ever.’

‘That’s what Sekunder told me and I think he believed it.’

‘Coming back to it with a clear mind, there seems to be something wrong with that.’

‘In what way?’

‘Why should the people who built the tomb leave it to nature to do what they themselves could have done?’

‘You mean they could have knocked the spire over?’

‘Either that or they could have buried the whole thing under rocks. They obviously knew how to handle them and there’s unlimited material to work on. I’d say the legend, like most legends, in the course of time has become a mixture of fact and fiction. A feeling is growing on me that there’s more to this than meets the eye.’

‘Everything is plain enough to see. What else could there be?’

‘A trap, perhaps.’

‘A trap for what?’

‘To catch possible grave robbers who tried to pillage the contents of the grave. That goes on even today and no doubt always did go on.’

‘I don’t quite see what you mean.’

‘There might be some mechanism, a balanced rock under the sand possibly, which could cause the pinnacle to fall on anyone interfering with the tomb. The ancients were cunning at that sort of thing.’

‘They relied mostly on spells and incantations to protect their dead.’

‘Some of them seem to have worked, too. Queer things have happened to grave despoilers, notably in Egypt. Maybe the sorcerers knew their job.’

‘Don’t tell me you’re superstitious,’ sneered Adrian.

‘I try not to be, but in some things I don’t scoff at facts.’

‘Let’s be practical,’ said Adrian curtly. ‘I can’t see how we can check this thing for a trap.’

‘Neither can I. It isn’t necessary, anyway. We came to try to knock it down, so we might as well get on with it before the tools get too hot to hold.’

Picking up the tools which had been dropped, they made their way up the steeply rising ground behind the spire to where an almost unlimited supply of boulders, large and small, lay strewn around.

‘Take care if you touch a rock with your hands,’ warned Biggles.

‘Scorpions have a habit of sitting under them, and if one gets his sting into you, you won’t forget it in a hurry.’ Taking the crowbar, he advanced to a boulder, weighing perhaps a hundredweight, that appeared to be in line with the spire. Seeing he was unable to dislodge it, Bertie gave a hand, using the point of the pick as a lever. It was enough. Slowly the rock turned over, turned again, and then, gathering speed, went crashing and bouncing down the hill, taking with it a number of smaller ones in a minor landslide.

Everyone must have been surprised by the result, supposing that it would take some time to score a direct hit on the target. The one shot was enough. Actually, the big rock missed its mark although it passed close. Whether it was the vibration caused by this, or the impact of some of the smaller rocks that did bang against it, was immaterial. The effort was successful beyond expectations. They all watched, fascinated, as the pinnacle began to sway; then, as if going over the point of balance, it fell with a crash which, in the silence, would have been heard for miles had there been anyone to hear it. A cloud of dust rose in the air.

‘Well, blow me down!’ exclaimed Bertie delightedly. ‘It worked. We’ve done it.’

Biggles did not move. He spoke slowly, seriously. ‘I never like saying “I told you so”, but I’m pretty sure now I was right about the whole thing being a trap. The spire shouldn’t have fallen as easily as that. It only needed a touch. We could have pushed it over. I don’t like it. Maybe I’m over-cautious, but here we’re dealing with something we don’t understand.’

‘All I can say is I’m glad I wasn’t near it when it came down,’ declared Adrian. ‘Let’s go down to see what has happened.’

They walked quickly down the hill, keeping well clear of several snakes and scorpions that had been disturbed by the commotion. They had no trouble

with them.

Arriving at the tomb, they stood to survey the effect of the fall. It was certainly not what had been expected. The spire had fallen across the dome of the tomb apparently without affecting it in any way, except for a slight dent in the dome, little more than a graze. It had obviously proved stronger than the mass that had fallen on it. This, the spire, had not shattered. It had simply snapped across the middle like a carrot and now lay in two pieces, one part resting against the near side of the tomb and the other part, the pointed end, lying in the sand on the far side. The sand and dust thrown up by the concussion was fast settling.

‘I can’t see that that’s helped us much,’ said Adrian without enthusiasm.

‘It has done away with the landmark,’ Biggles pointed out.

‘Never mind about that. I was hoping the tomb would crack. I want to see inside it. That was why I spent my money on a plane in the first place, to get here.’

‘Ah well, you can’t have it all ways,’ returned Biggles evenly. ‘At all events we’ve done what we came here to do, so let’s be satisfied with that.’

‘And if the idea was to throw Sekunder off his course, we were only just in time,’ said Ginger sharply. ‘Look!’ Raising an arm, he pointed a finger out across the desert.

Everyone looked. Appearing out of the very sand, as it seemed, were camels. One by one, in single file, until there were six.

‘Don’t move, anyone,’ snapped Biggles. ‘Keep absolutely still. They may not see us; but against this background the slightest movement would be spotted instantly. Watch.’

CHAPTER 10

ADRIAN GOES ALONE

No one moved.

The six camels now stopped, bunched together. They were perhaps two miles from the hills and well to one side of the tomb; that is, to the south, nearly three miles from the canyon in which the Merlin was parked by the water-hole.

‘Where the devil did they come from so suddenly?’ ejaculated Bertie.

‘They must have worked their way between the big dunes,’ reasoned Biggles. ‘You’d hardly expect them to come over the crests.’

‘Of course. What a clot I am.’

‘I wouldn’t say that. From this angle one doesn’t realize the height of the dunes.’

‘What do you suppose they’re doing? I mean, why have they stopped?’

‘If you’re asking me to guess, I’d say they came out of the dunes expecting to see the leaning rock. Failing to spot it, and having no reason to suppose someone has knocked it down, they’re having a conference about it. They may think they got off course in the sand and have arrived at the wrong place. I hope they do. That’ll suit me.’

This may have been the right answer, for the camels had now lined up again and were moving forward, not directly towards the site of the tomb, but at an angle that would take them farther away from it.

‘Good,’ said Biggles. ‘By keeping more or less parallel with the hills they’re hoping to spot their objective. That gives us time to think. Pity we didn’t bring the binoculars.’

‘Shall I run and fetch them?’ offered Ginger.

‘No. It isn’t worth while. In the direction they’re going they’ll be out of sight before you could get back. I wouldn’t try running in this heat, anyway.’ Biggles glanced at the sky.

‘From the pace they’re going those camels don’t look tired to me,’ observed Ginger.

‘They must be tired after what they’ve just done.’

‘Then what’s the hurry?’

‘It may be the drivers suspect what I suspect.’

‘What’s that?’

‘There’s going to be a change in the weather.’

Ginger looked round the sky. ‘I can’t see any sign of it.’

‘Nor I. But I can feel it in my bones. There’s a change of pressure. That of course may be the result of a storm miles away.’

Not until the caravan had reached a position where hills hid it from view did Biggles permit anyone to move. ‘So that’s it,’ he said, stepping into a

patch of shade, the sun still being low. 'They've arrived. From now on we shall have to move warily, with our eyes open.'

'What do you think they'll do?' asked Adrian.

'It would be reasonable to suppose they'll give their beasts a rest. They must need one themselves. Having done that, they'll lose no time looking for the rock that marks the tomb. It wouldn't be a bad idea if we had a closer look at it, while we have the chance, to see if it has been damaged. Some of the stones may have been jolted out of place.'

At this juncture there was a moment of alarm when there came a sudden flurry of sound close at hand and fast approaching. It was the oryx: six of them. Evidently the herd that had already been seen. Coming from the direction where the camels would reach the hills, the graceful creatures raced by on the hard ground clear of the rocks. They may or may not have seen the men standing there; at all events they carried straight on, and the soft patter of their hooves faded into the distance.

'So they're still here,' observed Biggles. 'That tells us something. They haven't been back to the water-hole we're using, so there must be another supply somewhere in these hills. They knew where to find it, and when you scared them out of the canyon, Adrian, they went along to it. Now, having been scared again, they've come back. The poor little brutes must wonder what's going on. But never mind them. We've more urgent problems on our hands. There are two things we ought to do right away. The first is to confirm that Sekunder is in fact with the party that has just arrived, because if he isn't we've nothing to worry about.'

'I'm not worried,' asserted Adrian, bluntly.

'I know you're not,' retorted Biggles. 'That's because you're young and irresponsible, and at the moment you've got a chip on your shoulder. Having a lot to lose and nothing to gain by staying in this sand-blasted wilderness, I take a different view. But let's not go over that again. The second thing we should know is what these new people are doing, to give us a line on why they've come here.'

'I see no difficulty about that,' said Adrian. 'I'll go to find out. Both questions could be answered together.'

'What do you mean — *you'll* find out? Are you suggesting you'll go alone?'

'Why not?'

'Why you?'

'For the very good reason I'm the only one who knows Sekunder by sight. None of you would recognize him if you saw him. Moreover, having done a lot of walking in the time I've been here, I know my way about. You've never been beyond this point.'

Biggles looked doubtful, but had to admit these were sound arguments.

'What's wrong with my idea?' inquired Adrian.

'I'm wondering if I dare trust you to go alone. Knowing how you feel

about Sekunder —'

'You're afraid I might blow my top and start something?'

'Frankly, yes.'

'You needn't get in a flap about that. I can take care of myself.'

'That's what you think. I'm not so sure. Wouldn't you like someone to go with you?'

'No. He'd only be in the way. If I go alone I shall only have myself to worry about.'

Biggles hesitated. 'Very well, if that's how you want it. But let's get this straight. If I let you go —'

'Let me go? You can't stop me. I can do as I like.'

Biggles' jaw set. For a moment he looked as if he would say what obviously he was thinking. Instead, he merely shrugged. 'You promise you won't start anything on your own?'

'I shan't go out of my way to look for trouble.'

'You'll simply find out what we want to know and then come straight back here?'

'Yes.'

'Fair enough. If you don't find us here we shall have gone back to the aircraft. There's nothing much we can do here, and I see no point in staying out in the sun longer than is necessary.'

Adrian nodded. 'All right. That's clear enough. I'll get along right away. The sun won't worry me. I'm acclimatized. See you presently.' With his water-bottle slung over a shoulder he strode off along the line of hills.

'Be careful what you get up to,' pleaded Biggles. 'Having found you, I don't want to go home without you.'

Adrian merely raised a hand to show that he had heard.

The others watched him out of sight.

Biggles bit his lip. 'I don't like this,' he muttered. 'I know that young man better than he knows himself. If he only does what he says he will do, okay; but a little voice in the back of my head is telling me it's a mistake to let him out of my sight. No doubt at this moment he means what he said; but if he sees Sekunder he may have second thoughts. He doesn't mean to be difficult. He's just young and impetuous. Self-confidence is all right, but one can have too much of it.'

'Well, he's gone, so there's no sense in fretting about it,' said Ginger. 'We were going to have a closer look at the tomb, so let's do that and get back to the canyon out of this blistering sun.'

'I'm with you, absolutely,' murmured Bertie. 'Handsome men, they say, are slightly sunburnt; but I don't want to lose my hide.'

Nothing more was said. They turned to the tomb.

At first glance there appeared to be nothing of particular interest. The rocks of which the dome-shaped structure had been built, although only of a soft sort of sandstone, had taken the shock of the weight falling across it

apparently without moving. A few small chips had been knocked off, but it remained intact. The leaning spire lay as it had fallen, broken in two pieces, the top part clear on the sand beyond the tomb, the other part lying partly across it. Biggles examined the base carefully, but could find no trace of the trap he half suspected, although the sand and small rocks that had poured down in the landslide made a thorough examination difficult. He climbed on the rock and made his way along it to the middle of the dome.

‘Not even a crack,’ he reported, when he jumped down.

‘The johnnies who built this knew their stuff,’ declared Bertie.

‘There’s something here. Come round,’ called Ginger from the far side of the monument.

What he had discovered could not by any stretch of the imagination be called sensational, or even exciting.

It was simply a small semi-circular hole, about a foot across, the bottom level with the sand.

‘Ha! Where the bees go in and out,’ quipped Bertie. ‘The bally thing looks more and more like one of those old-fashioned beehives.’

Biggles was looking at the hole. ‘Was that here before the rock fell?’ he asked.

Ginger answered. ‘I don’t think so. If it was I didn’t notice it, and I came round this side.’

‘I don’t remember it,’ contributed Bertie.

‘Hm,’ mused Biggles. ‘Then I wonder what caused it. It looks to me as if the whole thing was pushed forward on its base, bodily, a little way, when the big rock hit it from behind. That could have exposed the hole. It must always have been there.’

‘Someone forgot to put in the last brick,’ suggested Bertie.

‘I wish you’d stop talking nonsense and use your head.’

Bertie lay flat and peered into the hole. ‘It goes right in, but I can’t see anything. I can tell you this. The thing is as hollow as a drum.’

‘Considering what it is, you wouldn’t expect it to be solid,’ returned Biggles with gentle sarcasm. His voice rose sharply. ‘Wait! What are you going to do?’

Bertie was reaching forward. ‘Put my arm in to see if I can feel anything.’

‘I wouldn’t do that. You might get hold of something nasty.’

‘Such as what, old boy?’

‘What do you usually find in a grave? Here, use this. You’ll be able to reach farther.’ Biggles handed down the crowbar.

Bertie took it and inserted it. The others watched as he moved it about. ‘I’m touching things, but I wouldn’t try to guess what they are,’ he informed them, withdrawing the bar and rising on one knee. Then, as the end of the bar appeared, he let out a yell, and dropping it leapt back as if propelled by a spring.

Clinging to the end of it, its venomous tail cocked high, was a black

creature the size of a small lobster. Releasing its hold on the bar, it scuttled back through the hole and disappeared.

Bertie looked at the others. His face was pale. 'I say, did you see that?' he gasped.

'Good thing you didn't put your hand in,' said Biggles grimly. 'That must be the granddaddy of all scorpions. Had you shaken hands with that beauty you'd have known all about it.'

'Phew! Talk about a shock. If that doesn't stop me growing for the next twelve months nothing will. I'm not putting my hand into any more holes, no fear, not me. Ugh!'

'Very wise in this part of the world,' answered Biggles seriously.

'How did the brute get in there? Could it have been put in there by the people who built the tomb — sort of watch-dog, if you see what I mean.'

Biggles smiled faintly. 'I don't know how long a scorpion lives, but I doubt if it could live as long as that. I imagine it was swept down the hills in the landslide we made, and seeing the hole popped into it. It may have walked in while we stood here nattering. Scorpions like holes. No matter. At least we know the devil is in there.' As he finished speaking Biggles picked up the bar and tried to prise aside the stones adjacent to the hole. He failed to move them. 'No use,' he said. 'Still, now there is a hole it might be possible to enlarge it; but not now. It would be a long job, and I can't take any more of this sun. It's asking for sunstroke. Let's get back to camp. But before we go we'd better tidy up, so that Sekunder when he comes here won't see that someone has been meddling with the thing. Unless he learns we're here he'll suppose the leaning rock fell of its own accord.'

The sand was smoothed and other traces of their activities removed as far as this was possible.

'You're not going to wait for Adrian?' queried Ginger.

'No. There's no reason why we should. When he finds we're gone, he'll know where we are. Let's get out of this heat.'

'I don't see any signs of the change in the weather you spoke about,' remarked Bertie, as they set off on the return journey to camp.

'Maybe it's taken another course.'

They reached the Merlin without incident and almost without speaking, for the sun was now high and flaying the desert with its relentless rays. They had a long drink of water from the well and, having nothing else to do, settled down in the shade to await the return of Adrian.

Time passed. He did not come. Biggles said he was not worried. Adrian was quite likely to hang about all day watching the caravan. 'I think we can now be certain that Sekunder is with it, otherwise he'd have come straight back,' he affirmed. 'We've no interest in anyone else.'

But as the day wore on and the usual lurid sunset began to splash the sky with colour, and still Adrian had not turned up, Biggles had to admit that he was uneasy. 'There was no reason why he should stay away as long as this,'

he said irritably. 'He knew we were anxious for his report. I should never have let the young fool go off alone.'

'You think he's in trouble?' asked Ginger.

'What else are we to think?'

'Shouldn't we be doing something about it?'

'Not yet. We'll give him the benefit of the doubt and hang on for a bit. He may still turn up.'

'And if he doesn't?'

'I suppose we shall have to go to find out what's happened,' answered Biggles wearily. 'Whatever that young man may say to the contrary, I'm afraid he's the type that can't keep out of trouble.'

Adrian did not come. The sun sank into the desert. Night drew its sombre curtain over the drought-stricken land. The stars, indifferent to the affairs of men, appeared, hanging like bright lamps from the roof of heaven.

'It's no use fooling ourselves any longer,' said Biggles bitterly. 'He isn't coming or he'd be here by now. I'm not surprised. My common sense warned me, yet—' He broke off, raising his head sharply in a listening attitude as from somewhere far away came a long, low rumble.

'What the deuce was that?' said Bertie in a startled voice.

Biggles did not answer. He rose and walked briskly to the end of the ravine and looked out across the desert. The others followed him. For a minute no one spoke. They could only stare.

A monstrous stain was creeping over the horizon, putting out the stars. Its colour was an evil purple-black. Its shape was that of a crouching dragon which, slowly unfolding, looked as if it was about to spring. Constantly changing shape as it coiled and uncoiled within itself, it rose higher and higher until it spread right across the sky. Then, as they still stood marvelling at this menacing apparition, a strange thing happened. A shaft of vivid blue light flashed through it, tearing it across the middle. This, after a delay of some seconds, was followed by a long, deep-throated growl that set the sultry air quivering.

'Thunder,' breathed Ginger.

'I'm not such a bad weather prophet after all,' said Biggles dryly. 'We just needed this,' he added, gloomily.

'But look here, old boy, with this coming on what are we going to do about Adrian?' inquired Bertie, concern in his voice.

'Never mind Adrian, what are we going to do about ourselves?' returned Biggles trenchantly. 'Not being a desert Arab I don't know what's in that storm, but you can bet your sweet life that when it hits us we shall know all about it. What are we doing here, anyway? Risking our lives trying to rescue a silly young ass who doesn't want to be rescued because he's crazy to see the mortal remains of some king who died a hundred thousand years ago. It's time I had my head examined. If it wasn't for Adrian's father I'd feel inclined to pull out and leave him to it. We might just have time to get clear. You can

take it from me there'll be no flying once that muck arrives — and perhaps not after it's gone.'

No one answered.

Bertie polished his eyeglass mechanically.

There was another blinding flash of lightning.

'The storm's still some way off. How long do you reckon we've got before it arrives here?' asked Ginger.

'I wouldn't know. An hour, maybe, more or less. Why? Standing here goofing at it won't stop it. We'd better get back to the machine and plug the air intakes and do anything else we can to keep the sand out of the engines.'

'I was thinking: while you two are doing that, suppose I make a dash to see if I can find Adrian?' offered Ginger.

Biggles shrugged. 'A waste of time. If Adrian could get back he'd be here. He must see what's coming as well as we can.'

'He might have had an accident; fallen off a rock and hurt himself; or he could have been bitten by a snake.'

'That's a possibility,' admitted Biggles. 'If that's the answer and we just left him to die, we'd never forgive ourselves. All right, Ginger. You slip along. Don't go far. Start back before the storm breaks, or we may find ourselves looking for *you*. We'll attend to the machine.'

Ginger hurried off along the hard ground that fringed the outer hills.

1 Scorpions are pugnacious and mostly nocturnal. Those of the Middle East and North Africa can reach a length of nine or ten inches. The sting, in the tail, will rarely kill an adult in good health, but it can be serious and it is agonizingly painful.

CHAPTER 11

WHY ADRIAN DID NOT RETURN

Biggles, being human, was not always right. Knowing that Adrian had an obstinate streak in him when it came to having his own way, and aware of how he felt about Sekunder, it was perhaps natural that he should assume Adrian's failure to return resulted from impetuosity, possibly folly. In this he was wrong. In fairness to Adrian it must be said that when he set off on his reconnaissance he had every intention of doing what he said he would do; just that and no more. He would confirm that his late partner was there, of what the caravan consisted and what it was doing. That things fell out otherwise than the way he had planned was not his fault.

The first trouble, as he was eventually to discover, was this. The camels had reached the range of hills much farther away than he had supposed. Not only that; on arriving at the hills, the caravan had turned south, which took it even farther away from the tomb, or the leaning rock which it may have been seeking. This Adrian discovered when he struck its tracks in the sand. It seemed that the plan of removing the conspicuous landmark to confuse Sekunder had succeeded, although he still found it hard to see what had been gained by this. He began to wonder if Sekunder had in fact returned; if, after all, the caravan comprised nothing more than a wandering band of Tuareg. They knew the desert better than anyone and were always on the move for reasons of their own.

The heat did not worry him unduly. He had become accustomed to it. But once having seen the tracks, having no idea of how far the caravan had gone, or intended to go, he had to travel more cautiously, which meant more slowly, for fear of coming upon it suddenly and exposing himself. It did not occur to him to turn back. He had set out to do something and he intended to do it. So he kept on, following the tracks wherever they could be seen, noting that they did not go into the hills but kept to a line roughly parallel with them. It struck him that the party might be making for a water-hole unknown to him; he was now beyond the point of his own explorations.

The small herd of oryx scampering past in a panic, alarmed obviously by the caravan, suggested that it was not far in front of him.

He had, he estimated, covered five or six miles before he heard a sound which told him he had not much farther to go. It was the curious habit many camels have, when resting, of grinding their teeth. This is a common noise at night in countries where camels are used as beasts of burden.

He now proceeded with the greatest possible care, taking advantage of the ample cover provided by the rocky nature of the ground, stopping frequently to listen for voices which, naturally, he expected to hear. But all he could hear was the teeth grinding and the melancholy sighing of camels, which always

seem desperately sorry for themselves. In these conditions his progress, dictated by prudence, was slow, and he began to feel a little worried by the length of time he had been on his mission. More than two hours, he thought. He guessed what Biggles would be thinking about his prolonged absence. And as we know, he guessed right. However, he told himself, this could be explained on his return. He dare not risk moving any faster. If he was discovered, even if Sekunder was not there and he had only Tuareg to deal with, knowing about their hostility to white men, he was by no means confident of being able to cope with them.

He got his first sight of the camels from the top of an escarpment that ran across his line of approach. He thought he might see something from the ridge and he was not disappointed. In front, about a hundred yards distant, there was an open area of sand backed by a low cliff that offered a narrow strip of shade. Rising from the sand was a small group of stunted, sun-parched palms. Between them, couched, their loads lying near at hand, were six camels. Not far away stood two tall figures swathed from head to foot in loose material of indigo blue much the worse for wear. A veil, starting as a turban on top of the head, was wrapped round the face so that only the eyes were left exposed. Each man carried a long-barrelled, old-fashioned-looking rifle slung over his shoulder. They stood there, unmoving, without speaking.

Adrian did not need to be told they were Tuareg, once famed as the fearless masters of the desert. He had seen one or two at Siwa. Where were the other members of the caravan? He looked for them in vain. What could they be doing? This provided food for thought. Had they gone off to look for the tomb... or perhaps to look for water? There was no sign of a water-hole in the clearing. The camels were restless. Their humps were flabby, showing they were in need of food and water.

Adrian's eyes ran over the loads they had carried. There were the usual water-skins and packs, also — and this puzzled him — an extra large bundle with a waterproof dust-sheet corded over it. He did not spend much time wondering what it might contain, being at a loss to know what to do for the best. He was anxious not to be too long away, yet he did not want to return with his mission unfulfilled. He still did not know if Sekunder was with the caravan. From the fact that no attempt had been made to establish a camp, he formed the impression that the site now occupied by the camels was only temporary. The Tuareg were waiting for the remainder of the party to return from whatever they had gone to do. He decided that all he could do was wait, too. When the party was complete he would see who was in it, watch the direction it took if it moved its position, and then make his fastest time back to the canyon. This, he felt — and he was sure Biggles would agree — was the obvious thing to do. It appeared to present no difficulty.

What he did not reckon on was the time all this was going to take. He hoped it would only be a matter of minutes. An hour at the very outside. He was loath to leave his position which commanded such a good view of his

objective, but he soon realized he would have to vacate it or be fried like an egg in a pan. The sun, in passing over its zenith, had made the rock on which he was lying almost too hot to touch. It had already forced him to shift his position several times, although this brought no relief.

Determined not to take his eyes off the open space to which the missing members of the caravan must eventually return, in the end he had to. For more than an hour he bore the scorching rays of the sun: but they became intolerable and he had to admit defeat. He took a last look. The Tuareg still stood there, unmoving, silent. They might have been graven images carved from the dark rock behind them. The camels did not move except to raise their heads and sigh, and moan, and cry, as if they carried the weight of the world's troubles on their long-suffering shoulders: but this is the way of camels when they are distressed — as more often than not, they are.

Adrian dropped back to below the ridge and so made his way to level ground. He had said the sun had no effect on him and he believed this to be true; but he now discovered that it is one thing to keep on the move under the sun, but a different matter to lie still on a rock exposed to the full force of its rays. For a minute he thought he had stayed too long. He felt giddy. The rocks around him began to spin. Gasping, he took a drink from his bottle and splashed a little water on his face. Feeling only a little better for this, for the water was tepid, he asked himself the question, what next? Still determined not to leave without the information he needed, he resolved to move nearer to the camels, and if he could find a spot of shade, which might now be possible as the sun was well down in the west, he would wait in it, trusting to his ears to tell him when the absent men returned. All he really wanted to know was if Sekunder was among them.

Feeling better for his drink, he forthwith put into action the plan which, in view of the rock formations all around him, appeared to offer no difficulty. Nor did it, although as he could no longer see the clearing, he had to judge its position as well as he could.

He was presently to realize that he had made a fundamental error in supposing that the missing members of the caravan had left the clearing on the far side; that is to say, they were somewhere beyond the camels. This was a natural assumption, because had they been on the near side he would have seen or heard them. Or so he thought. With them farther away than the camels, as he supposed, he had nothing to fear. He would be bound to see or hear them before he himself was seen. In the event, as he was now to learn, this was a mistake, one which was to throw his scheme out of gear.

The first he knew about it was when, making his way silently along a steep face of rock, suddenly, from near at hand, there came a sound; an exclamation. He spun round, and there, not ten yards away, stood Sekunder with two other men. For half a minute they just stood there, staring at each other. It would be futile to speculate on who was most surprised; possibly Sekunder, from the way his eyes saucered, for he could have entertained no

doubts as to the fate of the partner he had so traitorously abandoned.

Adrian paid little attention to the other two men, but as his eyes flashed over them he saw one was a Tuareg and the other a man with a skin so light in colour that he might have been a European.

Now, had Adrian not been seen by Sekunder, he would probably have acted in accordance with the promise he had made to Biggles to keep out of trouble; but with Sekunder standing there staring at him, the decision was not in his hands.

After the shock of the meeting, unexpected on both sides, had worn off, Sekunder was the first to speak; and at first the conversation that followed was as natural as one could imagine in the circumstances, particularly as Adrian had by this time decided to take the line of least resistance in the hope of avoiding a show-down on the spot. In short, he behaved as he had told Biggles he would, acting as if he anticipated Sekunder's return.

In a voice pitched high with incredulity Sekunder said: 'What the hell are you doing here?' A foolish question, perhaps, but understandable.

Adrian answered, as casually as his shaken nerves would allow: 'Waiting for you to come back, of course.'

This reply seemed to astonish Sekunder. 'You mean — you thought — you knew I'd come back?'

'I didn't imagine you'd just gone off and left me here for good. But I must say you've been a devil of a long time fetching the tools, or whatever it was you went off to get.'

Having had an excuse put in his hands, Sekunder was not slow to grasp it. 'That's right,' he answered quickly. 'Seeing we hadn't a hope of getting into the tomb with the tools we had brought with us, on the spur of the moment I decided to dash home and bring along something more likely to be effective. I reckoned to be back the same day, but unfortunately my pilotage wasn't as good as I thought. I ran out of petrol, and trying to get down at the Fountain of the Sun Oasis, this side of Siwa, I wiped off my undercarriage.'

'You mean *my* undercarriage,' returned Adrian, coolly. He was finding it difficult to control his temper, for, of course, he knew Sekunder's explanation was nothing but a string of lies.

'All right, *your* undercarriage, if you want it that way,' conceded Sekunder. 'Naturally, I was worried about you.'

'Naturally,' repeated Adrian, sarcasm putting an edge on his voice.

Sekunder appeared not to notice it. 'Why are we standing here?' he went on. 'My camp is just round the corner.'

As they walked to it Sekunder continued with his explanation. 'Without a plane the only way I could get back to you was by camel, and that took time to arrange. In fact, I couldn't have done it had it not been for my good friend here, Mr Nakish Bolzana, a keen archaeologist, who put up the money.' He indicated the European type who so far had not opened his mouth.

Adrian nodded acceptance of the introduction. He did not bother to ask for

further particulars of Mr Bolzana. He wasn't interested. On the principle of birds of a feather flying together he assumed he was as big a crook as Sekunder. The fact that he was working with him was as much as he needed to know. Besides, his brain was racing, preparing for the questions he knew would come; which meant that he would be faced with the difficult problem of saying one thing while thinking something else. At this stage, now having the information Biggles needed, his chief concern was to get back to the canyon as quickly as possible; but at the moment this presented difficulties.

'Where have you just been?' he asked Sekunder, really to gain time.

'Looking for water. Our Tuareg friends knew of a well here, or they thought they did, which was why we brought them along. They said its position was marked by the leaning rock, but so far we haven't been able to locate it.'

'It's gone.'

'Gone! How? What happened?'

'It fell. I actually saw it fall.'

'Did it fall on the tomb?'

'Yes.'

'No wonder we couldn't find it. Did it break open the tomb?'

'It didn't even crack it. The tomb is exactly the same as when you were here.'

Sekunder took a deep breath that may have indicated relief. 'You must have found the water,' he said, looking hard at Adrian's face.

'Obviously, or I wouldn't be here now.'

'That was lucky. I left you enough food and water to go on with, but like I said, I didn't expect to be away for so long. Where is this water?'

'Are you short of water, then?'

'We could do with more. It depends on how long it takes us to open the tomb.'

Adrian pointed. 'It's in *that* direction, five or six miles from here, the other side of the tomb.'

'What were you doing here, so far away from it?' inquired Sekunder, a hint of suspicion in his voice.

'I saw the camels coming in from the desert, so I hurried along to see what they were doing here. I hoped they would give me a chance to get home.'

'Of course. I can understand that. You can show us the water presently.' Sekunder went on, changing the subject: 'By the way, coming here a plane passed over us. Have you seen anything of it?'

Knowing this question would arise, Adrian was ready for it; and he had decided to tell the truth, as far as it was necessary, for the sake of his own security. That is to say, it would complicate matters for Sekunder should he contemplate more treachery. 'It came here,' he announced calmly.

Sekunder stared. 'Here! Where is it now?'

'It's still here.'

‘Where?’

‘By the well.’

‘Why is it staying here?’

‘It’s waiting for me.’

Sekunder looked puzzled. He threw a quick glance at Bolzana. ‘Waiting for you! I don’t get it.’

‘It’s quite simple. The plane was looking for me.’

‘*Looking* for you?’ Sekunder stared as if he couldn’t believe his ears.

Adrian, seeing his enemy disconcerted, pressed home his advantage. ‘You see, it was like this. I promised to write to my father every week while I was away. When he didn’t hear from me he chartered a plane to find out what had become of me. He knew where we were going. Well, the pilot found me. He wanted to take me straight home, but I wouldn’t go.’

‘Why not?’

‘I decided to wait for you to come back.’

‘Why?’

‘Why not. After all, I’d invested a lot of money in this venture and was determined to see it through.’

‘You must have been sure I’d come back.’

‘To me, nothing was more certain. We’d found the tomb, hadn’t we? All that remained was to open it. I knew when you came you’d have the tools necessary to complete the job. I told Bigglesworth so.’

‘Who’s Bigglesworth?’

‘The pilot of the plane.’

‘Friend of yours?’

‘Never seen him before.’

‘And he’s still here, waiting for you?’

‘Yes.’

Sekunder looked at his new partner and said something in a language Adrian did not understand. Turning back to Adrian, he explained: ‘My friend doesn’t speak fluent English: I wanted to be sure he understood the position.’ He went on: ‘How long is this plane going to stay here?’

‘Until I’m ready to go.’

‘And when will that be?’

‘When I’ve seen the tomb opened.’

‘I see.’ From his expression, Sekunder received this information without enthusiasm.

‘Have you brought something which you think will open the tomb?’ asked Adrian.

‘I have.’

‘What is it?’

‘Among other things, a drill operated by an oil engine.’

Adrian now understood what was in the big parcel bound up in a dust-sheet. Apparently it had needed a spare camel to carry it. ‘Are you going to

tackle the tomb now, this evening?' he inquired.

'It's too late to do much today,' answered Sekunder. Which was understandable, as the day was fast dying. 'What we might do, if you'll show us the tomb, is move along to it now and so be ready to tackle it in the morning before the sun gets high.'

'All right,' agreed Adrian. 'That suits me.' This was true, because it would take him nearer to his own camp. 'When we arrive I'll slip along and tell Bigglesworth you're here and what you intend to do,' he suggested, more in hope than confidence that he would be permitted to do this. He was not fooled by Sekunder's almost cordial manner. He knew it could change in a flash if he made a false move.

To his surprise Sekunder raised no objection. 'Very well. Come over here a minute; I've got an idea.' Taking Adrian by the arm, he led him to one side. 'Listen,' he said, in a confidential whisper, as if he was afraid of being overheard. 'This plane. Could you fly it?'

'I don't see why not. It isn't a jet, or anything tricky. Why?' returned Adrian, wondering what was coming.

'I was thinking,' explained Sekunder, with a crafty smile. 'It would save a lot of trouble, and a dangerous journey by camel, if we had that plane.'

Adrian's face went blank. 'I don't understand.'

Sekunder dropped his voice still lower. 'It's too easy. As soon as we've taken out of the tomb anything worth having, we — that is, you and me — could fly home, leaving the others to follow on with the camels. See what I mean?'

For a moment Adrian was speechless. He knew he was dealing with a crook, but that any man could stoop to such monstrous treachery took his breath away. It was a good indication of how Sekunder's brain worked. What shook him as much as anything was that Sekunder should imagine he would fall in with such an infamous proposal. It put him within an ace of losing his temper. However, stifling his anger and still maintaining his conciliatory attitude, he simply said: 'I'll think about it.'

'Do that,' requested Sekunder. 'It would make things a lot easier for both of us. Now let's get along to the tomb.'

'What about these Tuareg? Are they to be trusted?'

'Don't worry about them. They've worked for Bolzana before.'

By this time the sun had gone and darkness settled over the scene. They returned to the camels to find the Tuareg standing close together engaged in earnest conversation. Bolzana was beside them. Their interest appeared to be in the sky. The camels were restless.

'We're going to move on to the tomb,' said Sekunder. He looked from the Tuareg to Bolzana. 'Is something wrong?'

'The men don't like it.'

'Don't like what?'

'The weather. They say there will come a storm.'

There followed a short discussion in which the Tuareg joined, presumably speaking in their own language, since Adrian was unable to follow it. When it was finished, Sekunder turned back to Adrian and said: 'They want to stay here. They say if the storm caught us on the move it could be serious.'

'They probably know what they're talking about,' rejoined Adrian. 'What are you going to do about it? It's up to you. I'm in your hands.' Actually, he was wondering if he dare risk making a dash for the canyon. The journey, he thought, in the dark, measured in time rather than distance, would take about two hours. A distant flicker of lightning, followed by an ominous rumble of thunder, decided him against such a plan, one which, if he was overtaken by the storm, might well cost him his life.

Sekunder hesitated. Then, making up his mind he said: 'We'll move on. That storm is some distance off, yet. It may miss us. Time is valuable. Even if we don't quite get to the tomb, we should get closer to it and be ready to tackle it in the morning.' He gave an order and the Tuareg began loading the complaining camels.

Adrian accepted the decision without comment. As far as he could see it was all the same to him. Sooner or later he would get a chance to slip away.

There was another flicker of lightning, for a split second revealing the strange scene around him in an eerie light. Looking up in the direction from which the tempest was coming he saw an ugly black shape creeping up over the horizon, putting out the stars.

CHAPTER 12

NO FUN FOR GINGER

When Ginger set out to look for Adrian he was less concerned with the storm than the possibility of putting a foot on a poisonous snake, as might easily happen in the dark. Not that he was unaware of what a desert sand-storm could mean. But it was not as if they were among the dunes. They had the hills for cover. All the same, he had no intention of being caught out. He would, he told himself, turn back the moment the storm came too close for his peace of mind. He would then make a run for it on the hard ground clear of the rocks.

For the present he was following the easy course between the hills, the one they had previously taken and which he was fairly sure Adrian would take. That is, assuming he was still on his feet. For Ginger still held to the accident theory to account for his absence. In such a place all sorts of things might happen. Adrian would not, for instance, get far with a broken ankle; and in a fall among the rocks that could easily happen. He might have struck his head, knocking himself unconscious. Snakes, lizards and scorpions were common. They came out at night. So thought Ginger as he hurried on, looking about him in the brilliant moonlight and pausing sometimes to whistle, hoping for a reply.

Actually, his judgment of the situation was at fault. There were two factors which he failed to take into account. The first was the rapidity with which the storm was approaching. There was not a breath of wind at ground level, but he should have known that conditions at a high altitude might be altogether different. A gale could be raging higher up. As a pilot he should have allowed for that possibility. His second error, or oversight, was failure to comprehend the degree of darkness that would occur when the sky was completely covered.

Darkness is a comparative term. It can be dark yet light enough to see, if only for a short distance. This, in the open air, is the most common form of what is called 'dark'. Usually, total darkness — that is, an utter absence of light of any sort — is only to be experienced underground, in a cave at a distance from the entrance, for instance. The simple truth is, Ginger did not stop to think of the difficulty and danger of trying to make his way through the hills when the lights of heaven were extinguished by the mighty curtain now about to be drawn across them.

It was not until he had reached the tomb without seeing a sign of Adrian, and there stood looking around, that he had the first doubts of the wisdom of what he was doing. Already the light was failing. The great black mass, now nearly overhead and stretching from horizon to horizon, was much nearer the moon than it had been a short while ago. In fact, he could see the movement,

either of the cloud or the moon, or both, for they appeared to be racing towards each other. All the stars behind the cloud had already been blotted out and he realized that when the moon was covered, the only light he would get would be from those that remained; and they would go as the cloud rolled on its way.

Flashes of lightning, becoming brighter as the storm drew nearer, only served to dazzle and make the darkness that followed more intense.

He stopped. He listened. Not a sound. He whistled. No answer. He called softly. Silence. Again, a little louder. No reply.

For a minute or two he waited, a prey to indecision. His common sense told him it was time to start back for the canyon; yet he hesitated, unwilling to admit failure. Moreover, he could not shake off a feeling that Adrian might be lying, helpless or even unconscious, no great distance from him. Why, otherwise, had he not returned? If he was on the ground he might be buried under sand when the storm broke; in which case he never would be found. It would never be known what had happened to him. It is not difficult to appreciate the quandary in which Ginger found himself.

In the end he fell back on compromise. He would go just a little way farther on. This he did. Again he stopped, looking, listening. He was actually turning back when, for the first time out of the silence there came a sound; one which at first puzzled him. Then he recognized it, for he had heard it before. It was the grunting, guttural noise made by camel drivers urging their beasts. They were coming towards him; and presently, as he stood there, he heard a few odd words of conversation.

What was going on — at this hour of night? Was Adrian associated with it? Anxious as he was to return, he thought he should find out. It could be important.

Moving quickly he took up a position behind a rock to watch. A minute or two one way or the other could make no difference. Or so he thought. A glance at the sky showed the cloud and the moon now very close. He realized of course that when they met it would be dark; but not *how* dark. All he hoped was that the moonlight would last long enough for him to see the approaching party. It did. Just.

Another minute or two of feet padding in soft sand and from behind a mass of rock appeared the advance guard. It consisted of three men. One of them was Adrian, easily recognizable by his lean figure and his voice. Ginger could hardly believe his eyes. It was not so much that he was there as his behaviour. He was striding along with his two companions chatting as if they were on the best of terms. They went on and disappeared round the next buttress of rock. The camels, with three tall dark figures in charge of them, followed. They, too, disappeared from sight.

Where they went Ginger did not know. He did not see them again. The sounds of their movements faded to silence. And there was no question of following, for at that moment the light went out. That is, the cloud overran the

moon. The effect was as if all light had been switched off; and for the first time Ginger realized what darkness could really mean. The cloud rolled on, engulfing the remaining stars.

He forgot about the caravan. He forgot about everything except the urgent necessity of getting back to the canyon before the storm broke; and this, he perceived with a twinge of alarm, was not going to be easy. He could not, literally, see his hand from a distance of inches. Which meant he couldn't see anything. To make matters worse, if that were possible, a blaze of lightning temporarily blinded him. With it came a clap of thunder that sounded like the end of the world, the more so when there came the crash of falling rock as if something had struck a near-by hill. Or rocks may have been dislodged by vibration. Ginger didn't know and he didn't care; he was getting really scared.

With his hands held out in front of him to prevent collision with obstructions, he groped his way towards what, judging from memory, he thought was the open desert. That would be the safest way. He would have firm ground under his feet. To try to find a passage through the hills in these conditions would be asking for trouble. With a hand shielding his eyes, he waited for the next flash of lightning, and when it came, accompanied by another deafening clap of thunder, he moved on quickly, keeping clear of the rocks he had glimpsed, in the direction of the canyon.

Then, without further warning, as if the last flash had burst the overloaded cloud, the storm broke.

It broke so suddenly, and with such violence, that it was as if the entire cloud had collapsed on the earth. Ginger gasped as a deluge of icy cold water nearly smothered him. He was utterly bewildered. He had expected sand; a sand-storm. Anything but this. Rain; in the middle of the worst desert on earth. He was shocked. It was not ordinary rain. He had never felt or seen anything like it, and he had known tropical monsoon weather. The noise dazed him. Dressed only in shorts and shirt he was of course drenched in an instant. Water poured off him. Feeling he was being drowned on his feet, he staggered to the nearest rock, and there he crouched, chattering with cold, his hands over his face to make breathing possible. All he could think was, how right Biggles had been, and what a fool *he* had been.

He did not even consider moving. He could see nothing, hear nothing except thunder, the clatter of falling rocks and the steady roar of the rain. Even the lightning, diffused by the volume of water in the air, was a hideous white glare that revealed nothing. Ginger was, in fact, quite dazed by the suddenness of it, although there had been ample warning; but he couldn't have imagined anything like this. Vaguely he wondered what Biggles and Bertie were doing. He was sure they must have been taken by surprise, too. Biggles had sensed a storm, but nothing had been said about rain.

There was this about it, he pondered, as with his head between his knees and his hands over his face, he squatted hunched up against the rock. There was no wind. The water came down not in drops but in straight ramrods, as

the saying is. With wind behind it the weight might well batter a man to death. That it could be so cold amazed him. How this could happen he did not know. One thing was certain: while the storm lasted it would be impossible to move, and folly to try.

After he had become more or less accustomed to these fantastic conditions, his thoughts returned to Adrian. What had happened? What *could* have happened? What was he doing with the man he had once threatened to shoot on sight? At all events, Ginger could only assume that one of the men with whom he had been walking was Sekunder. Where were they going? For what purpose? The uncomfortable thought struck him that they might have been on the way, under Adrian's guidance, to do some mischief to the aircraft. But he did not entertain the idea; it was too preposterous. Yet why were they moving through the night like a party of raiders? Was it possible that Adrian had changed his mind, believing he had been mistaken in Sekunder's character? No. He was too level-headed to be fooled a second time.

Ginger gave it up. There was nothing he could do about it, anyway. It was some consolation to know that Sekunder would not be able to do anything, either, while the storm persisted. The rain would answer the water problem for him, if he had been in short supply.

Ginger, incredulously, became aware that water was running over his feet. Water, more precious than diamonds in the waterless areas of the great desert: yet here he was, sitting in a river. It was not to be believed, and he could have laughed at the irony of it. Then, with a start of anxiety, he remembered what Biggles had said about the floor of the canyon. It had once been the bed of a river. Was it possible that in such a flood as this it could carry enough water to put the aircraft in danger? He realized well enough what was happening. The rocks could not absorb the water; it would be pouring off them like water off a slate roof; and the dust-dry sand would not in a few minutes be able to deal with such an immense volume of liquid. The water would be soaked up eventually, of course, but for the time being it could only run about, gathering in pools in the low places. If the ground became waterlogged the machine might not be able to take off. So Ginger, helpless, unable to move, tortured himself with doubts and fears.

How long it was before the freak storm began to recede he did not know. He lost count of time. He could not see the face of his watch. Wet, dejected and thoroughly miserable, he could only sit and wait for the cloud to unload its surplus water or pass on its way.

The break came at last, as it was bound to. The thunder and lightning were now in the distance. Then, quite suddenly, the downpour subsided to a drizzle. Presently a broadening patch of wan grey light in the sky showed the position of the moon. The drizzle became a clammy mist. All noise stopped. Then the cloud parted as if a great curtain had been drawn to reveal such a spectacle as Ginger would not have believed possible. The depression, on the hard floor of which the machine had landed, had become a sea; a wide expanse of tranquil

water, of strange beauty, in which the moon and the reappearing stars were faithfully reflected. Ginger stared at it, fascinated, telling himself it wasn't true. The picture was more of a dream, a vision, than reality.

The moon, a beautiful sight, wore a halo, with a filmy veil of mist still drawn across its face. The visibility it provided was not as good as Ginger could have wished, but there was now sufficient light for him to see his immediate surroundings, the new-born lake on the one side and a dim, ghostly background of hills on the other. The rocks smoked with a strange unreality.

He rose stiffly to his feet, thankful he was at last able to do something and still marvelling at the phenomena he had witnessed; a cloud-burst where, if reports were true, rain might not fall in a hundred years. He knew it could happen, but he did not expect to be present when it did. It explained some of the features of the empty land.

As he set off along the fringe of the lake, sometimes splashing through shallow water — water which, he noticed, was already receding — he remembered that the caravan was somewhere in front of him, between him and the canyon. It must have stopped; but where? Beyond that he had no interest in it, his one concern being to get back to Biggles to report what he had seen. He could now see the face of his watch. The time was 3.30 a.m. So he had been out all night, he reflected. And what a night.

Walking through a world that was once more silent except for the occasional murmur of running water, he was passing near the spot where he judged the tomb to be — he couldn't see it for reason of intervening rocks — when his footsteps were arrested by the sound of voices, sometimes raised high as if in argument. So that's where they are, he thought. He was tempted to investigate, but in his urgency to get to the canyon decided against it. It was more than likely, now the rain had stopped, that Biggles or Bertie would make a search for him, and he thought it better there should be no collision with Sekunder until the circumstances were known. So he hurried on.

The moon was now low in the heavens, but it provided as much light as he needed to find his way — while he was in the open, anyway; and it was with relief that he found and turned into the opening through which the Merlin had entered the canyon. The ground underfoot was a series of puddles joined by rivulets of running water, which did not surprise him, and he went on until halted by a peremptory: 'Who's that?'

He recognized Biggles' voice. 'It's me,' he answered quickly.

'Good. I was just starting out to look for you,' said Biggles, joining him. As they walked on together he went on: 'Why did you go so far? I told you not to risk getting caught in the storm.'

'I know you did, but how could anyone have imagined a storm like that? Is the machine all right?'

'Yes, although at one time for a few minutes it looked as if we were going to be washed out. We were in a river, with the water up to the tops of the undercarriage wheels. But never mind about that. How did you get on? Any

signs of Adrian?’

‘I saw him.’

‘You did!’

‘Too true I did.’

‘Then why isn’t he with you? Where is he?’

‘With the enemy.’

Biggles pulled up short. ‘Say that again!’

‘He’s with Sekunder; or, at any rate, with the caravan lot.’

‘Are you sure?’ Biggles sounded incredulous.

‘Quite sure. I saw him.’

‘What were they doing?’

‘The whole caravan was moving this way. That was just before the storm broke. I think it got as far as the tomb. I heard voices there as I passed it on my way back here. There seemed to be a bit of a row going on.’

‘You didn’t try to see what was happening?’

‘No. I thought it better to get back to you to let you know Adrian has come to no harm — not so far, anyhow.’

‘Quite right.’

‘Let’s go on. I could nibble a biscuit and drink a cup of something hot. I’m perished. The rain felt as if it had come in from the North Pole.’

They came to the machine to find Bertie scraping wet sand clear of the undercarriage wheels. ‘Ah! So there you are,’ he greeted cheerfully. ‘You should have taken an umbrella.’

‘Don’t expect me to crack my sides a’laughing,’ rejoined Ginger. ‘How about a cuppa?’

‘The kettle’s on the hob, old boy,’ Bertie told him. ‘As you may have noticed, we’re not short of water.’

‘I noticed it all right,’ returned Ginger.

A minute or two later, with a cup of tea in his hand, seated on a rock, he was telling Biggles the story of his nocturnal adventure. ‘Maybe you can work out what sort of game Adrian’s playing,’ he concluded morosely. ‘All this talk about shooting Sekunder on sight was a lot of poppycock. It looks to me as if he’s changed sides.’

‘Nonsense. Why should he?’

‘Possibly because Sekunder has brought some means of opening up the tomb. That’s really all he cares about. He told us so. That’s why he stayed on here instead of going home as soon as he had the chance.’

‘I wouldn’t say that,’ answered Biggles. ‘He’s not a fool, although how he’s managed to hook up with Sekunder’s party I wouldn’t try to guess. We shall know in good time. As soon as it’s light we’ll walk along and find out. If he prefers Sekunder’s company to ours that’s all right with me. I wish him joy. Tomorrow I’m heading for home. We’re practically out of food, and I’m not stuffing my inside with dirty dates for Adrian or anyone else.’

‘I hope we shall be able to get off,’ said Ginger.

‘Any reason why we shouldn’t?’

‘Have you seen the hard ground outside, where we landed?’

‘No, but I imagine it’s wet, and possibly sticky.’

‘It’s more than that,’ informed Ginger grimly. ‘It’s under water.’

‘The devil it is! Ah well, that can’t last long. Meanwhile, as things are quiet, we’d better see about putting in some blanket drill.’¹

¹ Blanket drill. Old service slang for sleep.

CHAPTER 13

BIGGLES SPEAKS HIS MIND

IT SO happened that Biggles did not have to go far to see Sekunder.

The next morning, as soon as it was daylight, while Bertie was preparing breakfast — such as it was — Ginger went off up the canyon to look at the depression and check how far the water had subsided. The purpose behind this, of course, was to ascertain if the Merlin would be able to get off the ground should this become necessary, as it might.

There was little change in the canyon itself; the flood-water had cut some new channels and piled up fresh ridges of sand; that was all. Nothing to prevent the aircraft getting out. Reaching the gap that opened out to the desert, he was not a little surprised to see no water at all. Nothing but bare sand. He knew the thirsty ground and the sun between them would quickly dispose of the water, but he did not expect to find it all gone so soon. It had left a curious formation of ripple-sand, like a seaside beach after the recession of the tide. He tested it and to his satisfaction found it firm and hard packed. This being all he really wanted to know, he turned back to the canyon, and in doing this he threw a casual glance in the direction of the tomb, thinking there was just a chance he might see Adrian coming.

He saw a man, some distance away, coming towards him; but it was not Adrian.

He did not wait for him, but hurrying back down the canyon said to Biggles: 'I think we're about to have a visitor.'

'Adrian?'

'No. But someone is coming this way outside the hills. I don't know who it is, but it certainly isn't Adrian because he's dressed like an Arab.'

'Hm. How about the lake?'

'It's gone. The ground is fairly hard already.'

'That's one good thing, anyway. If the man coming this way isn't Adrian I can only suppose it must be Sekunder, or whoever is in charge of the caravan. It will be interesting to hear what he has to say.'

With cups of tea in their hands they waited. A man appeared. He came forward a little way and then stopped as if something, perhaps the aircraft, had surprised him. As he came on again, and drew near, it could be observed that he was a slim, small, almost effeminate type, clean shaven, with a pale coffee-coloured face that could have been described as good-looking. He wore an Arab *burnous* over khaki shirt and shorts with rope-soled sandals on his feet. A native *kaffiyeh* covered his head, the loose ends hanging down over the back of his neck. Without any more hesitation he came right up to the aircraft and with what Ginger thought was an ingratiating smile — since there was no reason for it — inquired: 'Which of you gentlemen is Bigglesworth?' His

English was flawless.

Biggles answered: 'I'm Bigglesworth. Who are you?'

'My name's Sekunder.'

'Who told you my name?'

'Adrian Mander. He's a friend of mine. I understand he's been with you.'

'Where is he now?'

'He's with me. That's why I've come here. He asked me to bring you a message.'

'What is it?'

'He says there's no need for you to wait for him; you might as well go home and tell his father that he's quite happy where he is. He'll stay to see the end of the business that brought us here and then return home with me.'

Biggles did not answer.

Sekunder looked at him as if he expected one. 'What's the matter?' he inquired. 'Is something wrong?'

'Plenty,' returned Biggles shortly.

Sekunder's eyes, as dark as black buttons, opened a little wider. 'Don't you believe what I've told you?'

'Not a word of it.'

Sekunder's expression changed abruptly. He scowled. 'Are you suggesting I'm a liar?'

'If you want a straight answer, yes.'

'That's the thanks I get for coming all this way to see you.'

'You weren't thinking of my welfare when you decided to come here.'

Sekunder held out his hands, palms upward, Oriental fashion. 'Why should I lie to you?'

'You know the answer to that and I can guess it. What have you done with Adrian? You'd better tell me, and stick to the truth, because I shall get it, anyway.'

'Why should I do anything with him?'

'That's what I'm asking you.'

'I haven't done anything. He came uninvited into my camp and decided to stay. We're friends, with many things in common.'

'And he asked you to bring me a message to that effect?'

'Yes.'

'Why didn't he come himself?'

'He's busy working on the tomb.'

'With what — his hands?'

'No. With the tackle I went home to fetch.'

'So that's why you went off and left him here?'

'Of course.'

'Now you listen to me, and listen carefully,' returned Biggles in a voice as hard as iron. 'Let's understand each other without wasting any more time. You took Adrian's plane without his permission. That makes you a thief. You

left him here, expecting him to die of thirst. That makes you a potential murderer if not in fact. I trust I've made myself clear so far. I now give you fair warning that if any harm comes to Adrian Mander, I'll see you answer for it.'

'What nonsense is this?' cried Sekunder, in affected horror. 'Is this what Adrian told you?'

'Never mind what he told me. I'm able to draw my own conclusions. Now you get back to your own camp and send Adrian here to me. If he isn't here inside an hour I shall be along to find out why.'

'I wouldn't advise you to do that.'

'Oh! And why not?'

'I have some Tuareg in my camp.'

'What about it?'

'They don't like Christians.'

'Doesn't that go for you?'

'I happen to be a Moslem.'

'If that's true, then all I can say is you're a pretty poor specimen. I don't care what you are. Religion has nothing to do with it and you know it. And don't think you can scare me with this talk of Tuareg. I'd trust them farther than I'd trust you. If anyone is going to get hurt it will be you. Now push off and send Adrian to me. If, as I suspect, you were hoping I'd go home without him, you put your money on the wrong horse. When I go, Adrian will go with me. That's all.'

Sekunder glowered, dark eyes under his *kaffiyeh* roving from one to the other of the men looking at him. Then, without another word, he turned and strode away in the direction from which he had come.

As they watched him go Biggles said evenly: 'A nasty piece of work if ever I saw one. But at least he told us something we wanted to know. Apparently Adrian has come to no serious harm — yet.'

'Are you going to wait an hour for him to come?' asked Ginger.

'I most certainly am not. Anything could happen in an hour. I only stipulated that time to make Sekunder think we're not likely to move. I'm going along right away to see what he's up to. I imagine we shall find him at the tomb. We'll get to the bottom of this before he can do any mischief.'

'You don't think he could have been telling the truth?'

'Not a chance.'

'Then tell me this, old boy,' put in Bertie. 'Why didn't Adrian come back to us?'

'That's what I intend to find out.'

'What was Sekunder's object in coming here to us?'

'He wanted to have a look at us — or me, at any rate. From the way he hesitated when he first saw us, I have a feeling he thought I was alone. Obviously he's anxious to get me out of the way. He must have expected a pretty dim type to try to put over that phoney message from Adrian. There's

one thing sure. If we leave Adrian alone here with that glib young rascal, he's had it.'

'How did Sekunder know we were here?'

'Adrian must have told him. No reason why he shouldn't. Maybe he did it to ensure his safety for the time being. Had Sekunder not known we were here, he might have murdered him out of hand. He must have intended that when he abandoned him here without water. It must have given him a shock to find Adrian still alive. How that happened we shall find out in due course. As I said a moment ago, I'd bet Sekunder didn't expect to find three of us here, no matter what else Adrian may have told him. He may have hoped to find me alone, with the idea of pulling a gun on me and pinching the plane. Don't forget he can fly. No doubt he carries a gun; but when he saw the odds against him, he had second thoughts about using it. That's enough talking. Let's press on. I don't want to give him too long a start.'

Sekunder was in fact already out of sight.

'Are you leaving a guard on the plane?' asked Ginger.

'I don't think that's necessary as matters stand at present. Sekunder won't leave here until he's seen what's inside that tomb. He's reckoning to find a treasure, or he wouldn't have gone to so much trouble over it. Anyway, if some of his party come this way, we shall meet them. If there are five of them, it may need three of us to keep the situation in hand should it come to a show-down.'

'Don't forget Adrian's dead keen on seeing the inside of the tomb. What if he says he'd like to stay to see it opened?'

'If he's that crazy he can thundering well stay. I shall beat it for home. I've had enough of this inferno. It's going to be another scorcher. We're practically out of food, anyhow. Let's go.'

They were soon on their way, walking directly towards the tomb without any attempt at concealment, which would have meant delay. There were signs of the storm everywhere, small pools of water and newly-washed sand.

They were still perhaps two hundred yards short of their objective, with Biggles scanning the tops of the rocks in front of them for possible enemy scouts, when they were brought to a halt by a noise that seemed singularly out of place. It was the clatter of an engine of some sort, being started. Following this came a harsh grinding sound.

'What the devil!' exclaimed Ginger.

'That must be the equipment Sekunder brought with him,' said Biggles. 'He must have started work on the tomb. I can understand he's in a hurry to finish the job.'

'What a fuss over some poor blighter's grave,' sighed Bertie. 'I hope he finds in it nothing but bones.'

'Take it slowly now,' ordered Biggles. 'We'll try to get a sight of just what they're doing before they see us.'

'You're going right up to them?'

‘Of course. We haven’t time to mess about.’

They advanced now with more caution, keeping between the many rocks and still watching the ridges for anyone posted to stop them. Not that Biggles seriously expected opposition, reminding the others that Sekunder would believe he had an hour before there was likely to be any interference in what he was doing.

Apparently this was so, for they saw no one. Walking on soft sand, although any noise they might have made would have been drowned by the engine, they rounded the last obstruction to bring the tomb into view. There were six men present. Four of them, Sekunder and three Tuareg, were watching intently, standing close to a fifth who, on his knees, was working on the base of the tomb with what appeared to be a power-operated drill. Some camels were couched a short distance away. Against the top of the fallen spire rested three ancient muskets. Near them, seated in a curious position on a camel saddle, was Adrian. He, too, was watching the proceedings with interest.

Looking at the man working the drill, Ginger’s first impression was that he had made some progress. There was now quite a sizeable hole in the tomb level with the sand. This he thought was the one that had been exposed by the landslide when the pinnacle had fallen, now enlarged. The hole was certainly larger than when he had last seen it; but this he perceived was not so much the result of the drilling as of some sand having been washed away, evidently by the cloud-burst, for it had built itself into quite a heap lower down. The engineer was now working on the hole at the obvious place to start.

Such was the attention on the hole, and perhaps somewhat due to the noise, the new arrivals on the scene had not yet been noticed. Adrian was the first to see them. Facing towards them, a movement may have caught his eye, and he had only to look up to do that. He made as if to rise, but with a shrug and a grimace sank back. He did not appear to be hurt. Looking hard, Ginger saw the trouble. He was tied to the saddle.

Ginger attracted Biggles’ attention. ‘There he is,’ he said. ‘He can’t move. He’s tied.’

‘So that’s it,’ muttered Biggles. ‘Get him free. I’ll keep you covered. Bertie, stand by. There may be trouble.’

Ginger strode across the open sand to Adrian.

One of the Tuareg saw him. He said something sharply. Sekunder looked round, and from a stooping position sprang erect. He spoke to the engine operator who in turn got up. The engine stopped. Silence fell. It seemed curiously acute after the noise.

Biggles stepped forward. ‘Carry on,’ he said calmly. ‘Don’t let me interfere with the work.’

‘What do you want?’ demanded Sekunder in a voice of suppressed anger.

‘Just a word or two with Adrian, that’s all,’ answered Biggles.

CHAPTER 14

SEKUNDER MAKES A MISTAKE

For some seconds, in an atmosphere as tense as can be imagined, nothing happened. That is, there was no hostility on either side. Perhaps the situation had arisen too suddenly, had caught Sekunder unprepared. The Tuareg, dark and taciturn, did not move. They stood stiff and expectant as if waiting for orders. Maybe they didn't care. Sekunder had a conversation in a low voice with the engineer, possibly to explain something or ask for his advice. This was understandable, for it must have been apparent that a resort to open violence would not benefit anyone. Inevitably someone would be hurt, perhaps killed. Neither side was in a position to remain in the desert for any length of time. Although he was prepared for anything, Biggles thought, and hoped, that Sekunder would see it like that. It could be assumed he was anxious to open the tomb. Biggles had no serious interest in it. He was ready for a show-down, but he preferred not to force it. His worry was to get Adrian away and so finish the job he had been sent to do. Gradually the tension relaxed.

In this temporary stalemate Ginger untied Adrian and brought him across to Biggles. Sekunder saw this, of course, but he made no attempt to prevent it. No doubt he realized that had he done so the result would have been war. All he did was shrug and say something in a low voice to the engineer. The drill resumed its noisy clatter. This suited Biggles. The danger of an immediate flare-up had passed, although it was bound to come sooner or later.

He looked at Adrian. 'What happened to you?'

'I bumped into them by accident. I thought they were in front of me, but they came up from behind. What could I do?'

'What *did* you do?'

'It seemed useless to make a fuss, so I pretended to string along with them.'

'Did Sekunder believe that?'

'I don't know. He appeared to. His reaction to seeing me was amazement that I was there, still alive.'

'I can well believe that,' returned Biggles dryly. 'Did you send me a message?'

Adrian's eyebrows went up. 'A message? I know nothing of any message. Who said I sent one?'

'Sekunder.'

'So that's where he went this morning! I hope you weren't fooled by him.'

'I was not.'

'What was the message I was supposed to have sent?'

'He said you had decided to stay with them, so I might as well go home.'

‘Ha! That would have suited him fine. He wanted you out of the way.’

‘Of course. I realized that. You must have told him we were here.’

‘I told him *you* were here. I said nothing about Bertie or Ginger. I left that for him to find out for himself.’

‘How did this come about?’

‘He said he had seen a plane coming this way. Had I seen anything of it? Naturally, I said yes; it was here. I told him why. Had he thought I was here alone, he might have tried again to get rid of me. I’ll admit that at the first moment of surprise I was thinking of my personal safety.’

‘Of course. Now let’s get down to brass tacks and make an end of this nonsense. Do you want to stay here with Sekunder?’

‘Certainly not, although I’d like to see the tomb opened.’

‘Oh, damn the tomb.’

‘What do you want me to do?’

‘Go home. By the way, Ginger went out last night, before the storm broke, to look for you. He saw you with Sekunder. You seemed to be on good terms.’

‘I thought it advisable to take that line.’

‘Later, I gather, you had words, one might say a row. What caused you to change your mind?’

‘Sekunder said we’d camp near the tomb to be ready to start work as soon as it got daylight. He didn’t know where it was, so I had to show him. When we got there I said I assumed our original agreement still stood.’

‘What was it?’

‘I was to be head of the expedition in return for providing air transport, but if we found anything of value it was to be share and share alike. There were only the two of us originally.’

‘What did he say to that?’

‘He said it was no longer possible because he had promised Bolzana — that’s the fellow with him — a half share, for providing the necessary equipment and the camels to get it here. That started the argument. I said if he liked to give away his half share it was all right with me, but I still wanted my share. At the end I got angry and accused him of stealing my plane for his own ends. I’m a bit short-tempered when it comes to that sort of thing.’

‘So I’ve noticed.’

‘I also told him a few other home truths about himself. That, I suppose, was a mistake, because it resulted in the Tuareg setting on me, under his orders, and tying me up. I imagine that knowing you were here, that was as far as he dare go — unless he could get rid of you somehow. That’s about all there is to say. What are you going to do?’

Biggles thought for a moment. ‘That’s really up to you. I’ll tell you what I’ll do. I can’t stay here much longer because we’re out of food. I’ll wait for Sekunder to open the tomb if that can be done today. Early tomorrow morning I shall start for home. You’ll have to make up your mind whether you come

with me or stay here.'

'Are you going to tell Sekunder that?'

'Don't be silly. He'd simply delay opening the tomb until I'd gone.'

Adrian glanced at where the work of getting into the tomb was still going on, the noise of the engine drowning their conversation. 'Fair enough,' he agreed. They should finish today some time. If they haven't I'll pack it in and go home with you.'

'Now you're talking sense,' advised Biggles. 'If you stayed here with this bunch I wouldn't give much for your chance of ever getting away. What do you know about this man Bolzana?'

'Practically nothing. He's hardly spoken in my hearing. I have a feeling he doesn't really know what's going on. Sekunder has kept us apart. I suspect he has fed him a string of lies, as he did me.'

'What makes you think Bolzana doesn't know the truth of this business?'

'Because when on one occasion we were alone for a minute I asked him if he knew what had become of my plane. He just stared at me and said "What plane? I know nothing of a plane". Then Sekunder came up and put an end to the conversation.'

'I see,' murmured Biggles thoughtfully. 'It's time he knew the facts about Sekunder.'

'I gather Bolzana found and hired the Tuaregs with their camels.'

'No doubt. It's hardly likely Sekunder would have the necessary money. As for your plane, I think you might as well write it off as a dead loss.'

'I shall ask Sekunder about it,' declared Adrian. 'I'm not letting him get away with it.'

'Please yourself about that, but don't take any chances. You're lucky to be still alive, and you're not out of the wood yet. You know too much for Sekunder's peace of mind.'

During this conversation Biggles had kept an eye on the work going on at the tomb, aware that on its contents would depend Sekunder's behaviour. There had been some progress. The drill had loosened a large stone which now looked as if it might be lifted out. Sekunder evidently thought so, for he put a hand on Bolzana's shoulder as a signal to desist, or perhaps move out of the way. The engine was stopped. Then, instead of doing what was expected of him, he came over to where Biggles was standing and said curtly: 'Have you made up your mind what you're going to do? I've given you plenty of time.'

To which Biggles replied: 'You've given me nothing. My time's my own. Who said I was going to do something? I'm content to wait until you've made a way into the tomb.'

'You may be, but I'm not,' retorted Sekunder. 'I'd like a clear understanding about what is going to happen to any treasure we find.'

'I'm perfectly clear about that. You made an agreement with Adrian Mander to go fifty-fifty, and that's how it's going to be.'

‘I’ve already told him—’

Biggles cut in. ‘I know what you told him. I’m doing the talking now. Instead of arguing about something that may not exist, I suggest you carry on and settle that point first. All the tomb may contain is a few old bones, and none of us is likely to get excited over those. There may be nothing at all in the tomb. The time to talk about the division of a treasure will be when one has been found. Now get on with it.’

Sekunder had a good look at Biggles’ face. Finding no sympathy there, he merely shrugged, said ‘Very well,’ and went back to the tomb. Dropping on his knees he wrenched at the loose stone, this way and that, until he was able to drag it clear. The effect of this was to make the hole more than twice its original size, but it was still not wide enough for a man to get through. However, apparently thinking it large enough for a preliminary investigation, Sekunder lay flat and inserted an arm. After groping about for a short while he withdrew it and held up an object he had found. It was a human skull. With a gesture of impatience he flung it aside.

‘That’s no way to treat a dead man,’ protested Bertie.

Sekunder glared at him. ‘I haven’t finished yet. There’s something else here,’ he muttered, and again lying flat proceeded to reach for it.

Bertie remembered something. ‘Be careful. You may find yourself shaking hands with—’

That was as far as he got. The warning came too late.

Sekunder’s face was suddenly convulsed. He let out a cry of agony. Snatching out his arm, he scrambled to his feet, screaming. The reason was plain for all to see. Clinging to his hand was a scorpion, its tail arched over as it drove in its venom. It was a huge black beast, presumably the one Bertie had disturbed. Swinging his arm, Sekunder flung it off. Then, his face ashen, he sank down, groaning, clasping his injured hand.

Nobody else moved. The suddenness of the accident left everyone speechless. Ginger, in spite of what he knew about the man, could not help feeling sorry for the victim. He had never been stung by a scorpion, but he had seen men who had.

‘Help me, somebody,’ choked Sekunder. ‘Don’t just stand there staring.’

Biggles looked at Bolzana. ‘Can you do anything?’

‘I have nothing for such wounds.’

The Tuareg simply stood there, impassive, their dark eyes indifferent over their veils. They must of course have seen this sort of thing happen often enough.

Biggles stepped forward. He took Sekunder’s hand and looked at it. Already it was swollen to nearly twice its normal size. The wrist was thickening as the poison went up the arm. ‘Didn’t you bring anything with you to deal with this sort of situation?’ he asked, keeping a thumb pressed on the artery.

‘No. Have you got anything?’ Sekunder appeared on the point of fainting.

‘Not here. You need a doctor.’

Sekunder groaned.

Biggles looked at the others helplessly. The fact was, with the poison already in Sekunder’s veins, he thought there was little he could do, little anyone could do. More in the hope of appearing to do something than to serve any useful purpose, he twisted his handkerchief over the lower part of the victim’s arm to form a rough and ready tourniquet. Speaking over his shoulder he said: ‘Ginger, go as fast as you can to the Merlin and bring me the medicine chest.’

Actually, he did not think Ginger could get back in time to do any good. Nor for that matter was there anything in the chest likely to restore Sekunder. The poison would be in his body. There was some permanganate of potash, sometimes recommended for snake bite, and brandy. What he was really thinking of was a bottle of pain-killing tablets carried for emergencies, such as a crash in which someone might be injured. He did not think Sekunder would die, but he was likely to be ill for some time and would suffer a great deal of pain.

Sekunder had now collapsed. The sun was beating down, so the limp body was carried into partial shade provided by the engine cover spread over two rocks. Nothing more could be done.

Biggles looked round. ‘This is a nice business,’ he observed. ‘I didn’t think it would end like this,’ he told Bertie.

‘Couldn’t we have flown him to Siwa?’

‘I thought of that. There would have been difficulties, explanations, and that sort of thing. Strictly speaking it isn’t up to us to do anything. He isn’t with our party. But we may have to fly him somewhere eventually.’ Biggles looked at Bolzana. ‘Couldn’t you have done something?’

It turned out that Bolzana spoke better English than Adrian had supposed. ‘Me not a doctor. With camels too far to Siwa. Five, six days.’

This was obviously true. In five or six days Sekunder would either be dead or on the way to recovery, so the long and arduous journey, even if he survived it, would serve no useful purpose.

Biggles lit a cigarette and looked around. ‘Where are the Tuareg?’ he asked Bertie casually.

‘No use asking me, old boy. I don’t know.’

‘The camels!’ exclaimed Biggles.

Where there had been six there were now two.

‘I didn’t see ‘em go.’

The fact was, everyone’s attention had been so occupied with the stricken Sekunder, that no one had paid the slightest attention to the Tuareg.

‘Looks as if they’ve decided to go somewhere else,’ said Biggles grimly. As if a thought had struck him he went on: ‘My God! Ginger! I wonder — will they interfere with him?’

Bertie answered. ‘No.’ He pointed. ‘There they go.’

Some distance out in the desert four camels were trotting towards the big dunes. They had nearly reached them.

Biggles spoke sharply to Bolzana. 'I believe they were your men. Did you tell them to go?'

'No. I say nothing.'

'Then why have they left you?'

Bolzana shrugged. 'Tuareg are like that. I think I can explain. They like not disturbance of tombs of ancestors.'

'So that's it,' breathed Biggles. 'Well, I can't say I'm surprised. I was always given to understand the Tuareg were unpredictable. Are they likely to come back?'

'No.'

'Are you going after them?'

'No use.'

'But what about the camels? They were yours.'

'No. The four camels that have gone are their own. I hired them with the use of their animals. Only the camels they have left are mine. I don't think they would rob me. They have worked for me before. They have left us some water skins. That also is like the Tuareg. They know the meaning of thirst.'

Silence fell: a scorching, sun-drenched hush in which the departing Tuareg appeared to be swallowed by the sea of sand — as in a manner of speaking they had been.

Biggles looked directly at Bolzana. 'How do you come into this? Who are you? Where do you come from?' he asked bluntly.

To which Bolzana replied: 'I would like to ask you the same questions. There are many things I do not understand.'

CHAPTER 15

HOW IT ENDED

After a brief pause in which the still unconscious Sekunder was moved a little to keep him in the shade, Bolzana continued, in fair English, but with a marked accent:

‘I will speak first,’ he said. ‘I am Turkish, but long resident in Egypt. I began my career as an archaeologist, but having little money I became a professional explorer and dealer in antiquities. Some I find. Some I buy. That is why I am here.’

‘And what you find you keep, I suppose?’

‘Oh no. I am an agent trusted by the Egyptian government. Anything that comes my way I hand over to them.’

‘For a reward?’

‘Of course. I have to live.’

‘Where do you live?’

‘Now I live in a little house beside the lake at Maasir, which is near Siwa. People know me and bring me things they find. I give them a fair price.’

‘Is that where you met Sekunder?’

‘No. I met him first in Upper Egypt about two years ago. I was excavating some ancient ruins and for a short while he worked for me. Some weeks ago he came to see me at my house at Maasir and made a proposal. He said he had a clue to the position of the lost tomb of King Ras Tenazza, sometimes spoken of in the legends of the natives. He said he was about to confirm this. If he did so, would I finance an expedition to the place? He wanted my assistance because I had a drill for my work. He had seen me using it when he was with me in Egypt. It would be needed to excavate the tomb, if he found it.’

Biggles glanced at Adrian. ‘Now you know where he went and what he was doing when he left you at Siwa. It looks to me as if he had already made up his mind to do away with you once he had located the tomb. For that, all he needed was your plane.’ Biggles turned back to Bolzana. ‘He had previously made a similar proposition to Mr Mander.’

Bolzana looked puzzled. ‘I don’t quite understand.’

‘Sekunder had no intention of sharing anything with anybody. He wanted everything for himself. First he had to find the tomb. To do that he asked Mr Mander, who owned a plane, to fly him here. Which he did. Sekunder then went off with the plane, leaving Mr Mander here to die, as he thought, of thirst. Then, needing your help and transport, he went to you, having previously prepared the ground.’ Biggles went on to explain exactly what had happened, filling in the details.

Bolzana looked horrified. ‘I knew nothing of this, I assure you.’

‘I believe you.’

‘The man is a scoundrel.’

‘He is.’

‘And a liar.’

‘I’m beginning to wonder if he ever told the truth in his life.’

‘Now I begin to understand many things.’

‘Sekunder, having no money to finance an expedition, was on something for nothing. He used Mander for his plane, and you because you were an experienced desert explorer able to provide a means of opening the tomb. That, I think, in plain English, was his scheme. Had a treasure been found in the tomb, I doubt if you would have had any part of it. You may never have got back to Siwa. With that end in view, it would not surprise me to know that Sekunder, behind your back, told lies to the Tuareg to induce them to desert you.’

‘It is possible. He spoke much with them. He could speak their language. I remember now hearing the Tuareg whispering among themselves. I overheard something about a spirit guarding the tomb, but I paid no attention to it. They think there are evil spirits everywhere.’

‘As it happened on this occasion they were right. There was one in the tomb, in the shape of a scorpion,’ replied Biggles, succinctly. He looked straight into the eyes of the man facing him. ‘Tell me this, Mr Bolzana. Why did you sabotage our base camp?’

Bolzana looked mystified. ‘This I do not understand.’

‘You reached these hills by way of the Oasis of El Arig?’

‘Yes.’

‘You must have seen our tent and the stores we left there.’

‘Of course. But we did not touch anything.’

Biggles frowned. ‘Are you sure of that?’

Bolzana hesitated, thought for a moment, then drew a deep breath. ‘This explains something. It must have been Sekunder.’

‘How could he do that without you seeing him?’

‘It was after we had left. Sekunder said he had forgotten something and must go back. He would catch us up.’

‘Did he do that?’

‘Yes. It was some time later when he overtook the rest of us.’

‘That’s when it must have happened. Would you have touched our things?’

‘Never, and I would not have allowed anyone else to touch them. I did not know to whom the camp belonged, but it is a law of the desert to respect the property of others. To touch it could bring death to someone.’

Biggles nodded. ‘Very well, Mr Bolzana. That explains that. It seems that your friend Mr Sekunder does not obey the law of the desert.’

‘Please do not call him my friend. A travelling companion, yes. What are you going to do with him?’

‘Me? Nothing. I suppose I could take him to court for theft and attempted murder, but what good would that do? It would only involve Mr Mander in

more trouble and expense. Mr Mander still hopes to recover his plane if Sekunder will tell us exactly where he left it.'

'When I get home I shall see that Sekunder never again sets foot in Egypt. I am not without influence. I will report him to Cairo. He is a danger to everyone.'

'That's up to you,' rejoined Biggles, carelessly. 'The silly thing is we still don't know what's in the tomb, or if there is anything at all. While we're waiting here for my friend to return with the medicine, don't you think, as we are on the spot, it would be a good thing to settle the question once and for all? I see no point in spending more time here than is necessary. When the tomb has been opened we can all go home.'

Bolzana agreed. 'That should not take long now we have made an opening,' he said. He went to his drill and started the engine.

He was quickly able to demonstrate that in this he was right. The stones round the aperture were easily loosened with the point of the drill and with three helpers could be dragged to one side. 'Sekunder's downfall was his impatience,' said Bolzana, during a breather, for the heat was appalling. 'I told him to wait.'

'You won't catch me putting a hand inside until I can see what's there. No bally fear,' asserted Bertie.

With stones removed from the base, weakening the whole structure, it was the weight of the lower part of the fallen pinnacle that really finished the job. It had cracked the dome right across, letting in enough light for the interior to be seen. A few minutes' more work removing stones that seemed likely to fall inside, and they all crowded round to see what there was to be seen. There appeared to be very little. Certainly there was no sign of the fabulous treasure which Sekunder believed must be there. What there was could be observed at a glance.

On the sandy floor had been spread a piece of woven material, a rug, a mat, or perhaps a small blanket. It was in shreds anyway. On it reposed a human skeleton minus the skull, which Sekunder had of course already thrown out. The bones were so old that only the larger ones remained, the vertebrae, the arms and the legs.

'So now we know,' said Biggles quietly, taking a cigarette. 'Not much to make such a fuss about.'

'This is how these things so often end,' said Bolzana sadly.

'You don't think the tomb may have been robbed?'

'No. It was intact. There was never more here than there is now. I see a gold armlet on the forearm — a common object in this type of grave. There is also something round the neck, as I would expect.' Bolzana brought it out. It was a primitive necklace of leather thongs linking some gold beads and various stones, mostly only semi-precious, but including some roughly polished emeralds. There were also one or two nice pieces of lapis lazuli. 'Nothing of great value,' observed Bolzana. 'The emeralds might be worth

something, but they are not very good ones.'

The only other object that a closer search revealed was a sword with the blade so corroded by rust that it crumbled at a touch.

'So now we can all go home,' said Biggles, when they had assembled outside. He gave Adrian a sympathetic smile. 'I hope you're not too disappointed.'

'Frankly, I am, rather,' admitted Adrian ruefully. 'I expected something more exciting, but I suppose that's the luck of this sort of business.'

'You're right. That's one lesson you've learned, anyway. The only question that remains is, what are we going to do with him?' He looked across at Sekunder who, eyes open, was watching them. 'We can't leave him here.'

'That's up to you.'

'He can come home with me, at least as far as Siwa. But we can talk about that presently,' concluded Biggles, as Ginger arrived with the little white plastic box, decorated with a red cross, always carried in the aircraft against an emergency. He took it and went over to Sekunder, now beginning to moan again.

'Come on. Pull yourself together so that I can have a look at you,' ordered Biggles briskly, putting the box on the ground and opening it.

Sekunder opened his eyes wide. 'What are you going to do to me?'

'If I had any sense I'd go home and forget about you, but I'll help you as far as I can. Here, drink this.' Biggles poured a tot of brandy to help him to swallow a pain-killing tablet. Sekunder drank it. 'Now give me your hand.'

With an effort that brought a groan, Sekunder raised the injured arm. Livid and swollen to the shoulder, it was not a pretty sight.

Biggles did what he could. He was not a doctor, and he had had no experience of scorpion wounds, so all he could do was treat the sick man as for snake bite. He found the mark of the sting, smeared it with iodine and lanced it till the blood ran. At the sight of his own blood Sekunder nearly fainted again. Biggles took no notice. He rubbed in some crystals of permanganate of potash, put on a bandage and rested the arm in a sling. After another sip of brandy he said, 'Sit up.'

'I can't.'

'All right. Lie still and die. You'd do better to keep your blood moving. If the poison—'

Sekunder sat up.

'That's better,' said Biggles. 'I'm going to ask you some questions and I want straight answers. But first of all you'd better know we've seen inside the tomb.'

Sekunder started. 'You have! What did you find?'

'Nothing. Well, practically nothing. A few old bones.'

With another groan Sekunder fell back. 'Then I'm ruined. I put all my money in this venture.'

'What you mean is other people's money,' said Biggles bluntly. 'What

you've got is what you deserve. Where did you leave Adrian's plane?"

Sekunder hesitated. 'Why do you want to know?'

'We shall take it home with us.'

'You might as well forget about that.'

'Why?'

'I crash-landed and it went up in flames.'

'You told me—'

'I know. That wasn't true.'

'What a liar you are. What happened?'

'It was an accident.'

'That, I suspect, is another lie.' Biggles' voice hardened. 'The truth is, having no further use for it you set it on fire to get rid of it before awkward questions could be asked. Is that it?'

'Yes.'

'Where did this happen?'

'Where I told you. At the Fountain of the Sun.'

'That's just south of Siwa,' put in Bolzana, who was listening.

'Then we'll check it on the way home,' Biggles told Adrian. He turned back to Sekunder. 'The Tuareg have deserted with their camels. Were you responsible for that?'

Sekunder did not answer.

Biggles went on grimly. 'Now you listen to me, and listen hard, you damned scoundrel. We're off home, and you have to face the little matter of getting home yourself. I hope you enjoy your walk.'

Sekunder looked startled. 'You can't leave me here.'

'What else did you think I was going to do with you?'

'I thought you'd take me home with you.'

'For sheer brass face you'd shame the devil himself,' rasped Biggles. 'Why should I clutter myself up with a dirty little crook?'

'But you can't leave me here to die,' pleaded Sekunder.

That's what you did to Adrian, isn't it? Pah! you make me sick.'

'He can come home with me,' offered Bolzana. 'There is a spare camel.'

'That would mean abandoning your drill,' Biggles pointed out. 'This trip has cost you enough already. I can't carry your drill, but I could give you a lift home if you're in a hurry to get back.'

'Thank you, but I can make my own way home. I know the desert. I can't afford to lose my camels.'

'As you wish. In that case I'd better take Sekunder with me. I can put him off at Siwa. That would enable you to take your drill.'

'I shall do better travelling alone than with a sick companion.'

'Much better, I'd say, than with a man who might murder you on the way for your camels,' said Biggles harshly. 'If that's settled we needn't waste much more time here. We'd better make our own arrangements.' He glanced up at the now darkening sky. 'I shall leave tomorrow at dawn.' He looked

down at Sekunder. 'You understand that?'

'Yes.'

'You'll be coming with me.'

'Thank you.'

'Then that's about all there is to say,' concluded Biggles.

Bolzana offered Adrian the necklace that had been found in the tomb.

'Take this for a souvenir,' he said.

Adrian accepted it, saying: 'Not that I really need a souvenir to remind me of this hideous place and what happened here.'

Such was the unusually tame ending of an unpleasant case which was really outside Biggles' normal duties, one which at a certain period promised to be both difficult and dangerous. Little more need be said about it. As Biggles remarked at the time, all he wanted to do was go home and forget it. And this in fact is what happened.

At first dawn the next day, having seen Mr Bolzana on his way (he, in Biggles' opinion, being the only redeeming feature of an unsavoury affair), the plane was brought nearer to the tomb and Sekunder helped aboard. He was still sick, and looked it, but not, Biggles suspected, as ill as he pretended to be. He was more sorry for himself than for anything he had done.

The Merlin took off and, as there was no reason to go to El Arig, headed straight for Siwa. Biggles flew low, and circled, over the Oasis called The Fountain of the Sun, low enough to make out the charred remains of Adrian's little plane. He did not land.

'That's no use to anyone,' he told Adrian. 'Take a last look and call it a dead loss.'

He landed at Siwa. There, with small ceremony, Sekunder was put off to make his own arrangements. Without a word, and without once looking back, he walked away and mingled with a little crowd of interested Arab spectators. Nothing more was seen of him.

A short hop took the Merlin to Marsa Matruh, on the coast, where the first thing Biggles did was send a signal to the Air Commodore to say he was on his way home, with Adrian, to save Brigadier Mander any further anxiety about his son. After some refreshment had been taken, the machine was refuelled before crossing the Mediterranean to Europe. The following evening it reached England. Adrian, after thanking Biggles and his crew for what they had done, and promising to see them later, went straight on home to meet his father.

Biggles, with Bertie and Ginger, also went home, for a bath, a change into warmer clothes and a much-needed square meal. The next morning, none the worse for their adventure, they were in the office at Scotland Yard. Leaving the others to tell Algy about it while helping him to catch up on arrears of work, Biggles reported to his Chief who, after a glance at Biggles' face remarked: 'You look as though you have been out in the sun. Pity you couldn't have brought a little home with you. We could do with it.'

‘I’ve had all I want, and more, for some time to come,’ answered Biggles.

‘Sit down and tell me about it,’ invited the Air Commodore.

After Biggles had done so the Air Commodore said: ‘Don’t go far away. Brigadier Mander has just rung me up to say he will be looking in some time today to thank you personally for what you’ve done. It wouldn’t surprise me if he expresses his thanks in something more substantial than words. He’s very grateful.’

‘I think Adrian will take my advice until he has had more experience of the sort of people there are in the world,’ said Brigadier Mander, later. ‘He’s told me all about this rascal Sekunder and apologized for questioning my opinion.’

‘At all events, he’s had a lesson he’s not likely to forget in a hurry,’ stated Biggles.

THE END